

What Are You Waiting For, Oxfam?

The grassroots movements outside of Europe need to have a bigger say in their own affairs, but they also need to be a part of the general political work in the international networks equally with the rest of us.



The Ugandan Winnie Byanyima is director for Oxfam International, which is a break from the North Western cultural sphere's total dominance in the development aid agencies.

Photo: COP Paris (Public Domain)

By Jørgen Olsen – translated into English by Sune Vilsted

Secretary General in Oxfam Ibis, Vagn Berthelsen, writes in the magazine Fokus, no. 149, page 25, under the headline “Magten rykker mod Syd”:

“Many of the countries that receive help from Oxfam today are going to become capable of raising the money they need by themselves. We are already seeing the first steps of this right now, where Brazil and South Africa are well on the way to be accepted as partners in Oxfam in line with us. So in 50 years there might not be any division of donor and recipient countries.”

That is a terrible long time to wait!

Oxfam International has the Ugandan Winnie Byanyima as Executive Director and Juan Alberto Fuentes from Guatemala as chair. Oxfam has thus said goodbye to the total dominance from the North Western cultural sphere – for comparison: https://www.emmaus-international.org/images/site/menu/qui-sommes-nous/emmaus-monde/europe/danemark/GTU/docs_EN/Thornings_Top_Officials.pdf – and then the mental prerequisite to take new steps is definitely present.

Where I do not quite understand Vagn Berthelsen is concerning the link between “raising the money they need themselves” and the influence and the equivalence between the organisations in the close, distant, and general issues.

At Emmaus International, we require income generating activities if one is to be and stay a member organisation; however, we do not require that Beninese, Burkinabe, or any other non-Western European organisations must raise all the necessary funding themselves. And Western European organisations can of course end up in (temporary) situations, where we need solidarity from others in the movement. Naturally, we have some who are primarily donors, and others who are primarily recipients, but a crucial point is that we do not have this in our own organisational structure, see https://www.emmaus-international.org/images/site/menu/qui-somme-nous/emmaus-monde/europe/danemark/GTU/docs_EN/Power-went-to-the-South-at-Emmaus.pdf

In the last couple of months, the number of Europeans in Emmaus International’s Executive Committee has dropped from two out of eight to one out of seven because an Englishman has withdrawn, though it is not the end of the world.

Rolf Hernø, CARE Danmark, says to the magazine Udvikling, no. 6 in 2016, page 41:

“NGOs have long since moved their attention from the completely local projects to instead support the civil society partners, who work for the rights of the poorest and better governance.”

A part of the collaboration with such partners must be about them letting their voices be heard at an international level as well as being equipped with designated mandates without it first having to go through a filter in London or Paris.

In these times, the democracy is undergoing a crisis in many ways and many places in the world, but that should not stop international networks from taking some fresh decisions about rethinking and expanding the democracy. Oxfam, the mother network of everyone, could perhaps become the next network to take a thorough wrestle with the organisational aspects on all levels.

Besides being a coordinator in the organisation Genvej til Udvikling, Jørgen Olsen is also a member of Oxfam Ibis.

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Comment from Vagn Berthelsen:

Dear Jørgen.

We completely agree about striving for equivalence, and our own experiences with strategic partnerships with strong South organisations is something we have brought with us to Oxfam. And which we are continually pushing forward on the agenda. My point was that as long as the money predominately comes from the ‘North’ (including Australia and Hong Kong), then it will affect the relation. Not because the South is not being taken seriously, but because decisions about the use of donor funds are being made in the North. The new Danish strategy is an example of that: some countries were opted out just as sectors were opted in and out from a Danish perspective. This also happens on a smaller scale in Oxfam and similar networks because donor funds make up a large portion of the funds they have at their disposal.

Oxfam is working long-term to get more South members, where members are replacing national offices. India, Mexico, and South Africa are members; Brazil, Colombia, and Indonesia, among others, are on their way in, and we are discussing models to speed this up. In those countries where we “only” have national offices, new boards are being established where national resource people occupies half of them, while the other half will consist of Oxfam representatives like those in the country who are active in Oxfam IBIS.

I personally argue that Oxfam and others need to work more with, and through, existing, strategic partners, which we will not try to make into Oxfam clones. We should rather work on common goals and possibly assist them in defining their own organisational identity. There will probably be a need for Oxfam offices for a while, too.

PS: June 2017 Oxfam decided to move the international headquarter from the British university-city of Oxford to Nairobi, capital of Kenya.

Jørgen Olsen



Jørgen Olsen (born 1951) is a coordinator at Genvej til Udvikling (GtU), whose mother network is Emmaus International (EI), founded by Abbé Pierre.

He has went to the school of life and comes close to the definition of a layperson. Active in EI since 1969 – elected into EI's political committee in 2011, where two Africans, two Asians, two Latin Americans, and four Europeans are seated. Re-elected into the committee for the second and last 4-year period in September 2015.

In 1978, Jørgen Olsen co-founded GtU with a background in his and the co-founders' experience with different organisations in and outside of Emmaus. GtU collaborates with around 10 grassroots movements in West Africa, especially the Cooperative in Amatalal (Nigeria) and Pagla-Yiri (Burkina Faso) as the organisation in Emmaus International with the most members, namely 11,000 of which 10,000 are women. The collaboration includes buying and selling of craft products as well as well renovations, cattle breeding, horticultural and bilingual education (Tuareg and French) for children and adults in Amatalal.

Read [all Jørgens Olsens posts at Globalnyt](#)