

DevBalls

Exposing the absurdities of the aid industry

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About DevBalls

DevBalls is an online space for comment on the international development aid industry.

DevBalls is here because the aid industry has – functionally and morally – lost its way. And those who should hold it to account - the media, researchers, politicians - don't. DevBalls is here because aid can only become better when its absurdities and hypocrisies are open to view.

DevBalls is compiled by a group of aid professionals who control its content. We welcome relevant contributions sent to DevBalls1@gmail.com. Anonymity is guaranteed.

LATEST FROM DEVBALLS

‘LICKING THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU’ - ODI REBRANDS ITS VALUES



Why is it that the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the UK's self-styled "leading independent think-tank on international development", has apparently so little to say about current developments in UK aid and especially in DFID?

ICAI SCRATCHES THE SURFACE OF THE DFID MALAISE



The recent report from the Independent Commission for Aid (ICAI) - "How DFID Learns" - is a damning indictment of the organisation's approach to learning and evidence.

UNDERNEATH THE FRAMEWORKS, CONTRACTORS AND DFID COSY-UP

Framework contracts, central to DFID's quest to reconcile ever-bigger budgets and improved efficiency, have in practice become the means to restrict competition, reduce innovation and further line the pockets of large contractors.

OLIGARCHS ARE THE WAY AHEAD SAYS DFID



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SNOUTS IN THE TROUGH ON THE POVERTY FRONTLINE

With recent confirmation that the UK has succeeded in its aim of increasing aid spending to 0.7% of GDP, how is life now for aid's tireless workhorses, the contractors?

LUVVIES, PSEUDS AND SAINTED ONES

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COMPLIANCE UNIT TO CRACK DOWN ON UNPATRIOTIC NAYSAYERS



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Spend! Spend! Spend! Greening sets out her future aid vision



In a rousing speech to cheering City workers at the London Stock Exchange, Secretary of State for International Development Justine (Leader) Greening has set out her grand vision for DFID’s future role. Announcing a doubling in DFID’s economic development budget to £1.8bn, Greening said “We’re going to spend, spend, spend! We’re going to ruthlessly seek out large multinationals, banks and stock exchanges and other worthy causes and ply them

with grants, soft loans and any other freebie we can think of. And if they've had these before, we'll give them more! We're determined to make a difference!"

In emotional, hushed tones, Greening spoke of leading DFID's "dramatic, transformational journey". "We used to think all this was complicated – especially all this stuff about causes." "However", she went on, now smiling, "It turns out you know, it's actually all about doling out dosh and looking good! Not having to think, except about how we look, has been a hugely liberating experience for us all at DFID"! Reacting to the news, DFID's Country Director in Nigeria – a key spend target – confirmed that "Our budget has gone through the roof in recent years anyway. We know there's no link between spend amount and positive development outcomes and we've no idea how to spend it just now anyway. So we look forward to taking this "no-idea-what-we're-doing" model to a new level. It's just what Nigeria needs. It may be that low-flying helicopters (pro-poor of course) and wads of cash have found their time".

DFID have now issued a confidential memo to country offices on giving "proper" explanations for the new vision.

Meanwhile, a steely-faced spokesman for DFID's Key Suppliers Group, spoke of their resolve in standing "four-square" beside DFID. "It's been tough enough keeping up with the current spending drive. Average turnover and profits are up 80% in three years now and it looks like even more of this in the future. Can we keep this pace up? It's ambitious, yes. I can only say we'll try. We'll do it for the poor. God bless them"

Businesses – such as Sainsbury's, M & S and Tesco – are expected to react well to Greening's inducements. An anonymous source said "We do this anyway - supply chain development, training, standards etc".

"We don't need any grants. But all this "partnership, hand in hand" talk has no downside. Everyone needs a bit of 'cosy-and-caring' in their brand. And with downtrodden (but smiling) black and brown people it gives it a special exotic quality."

Greening's announcement of a further doubling of spending on economic development within three years comes in a context of a three-fold overall increase in aid in real terms since the year 2000. Leader Greening is reported to have visited several developing countries in her time in office.

MEMO TO COUNTRY OFFICES

How to explain DFID's budget increase? Ten high-level tips

It is conceivable that some will doubt the logic behind our new, even higher spend approach when using existing budgets effectively is our biggest problem. In responding, key points to emphasise include the following:

"World-class" – DFID is world-class; the programme is world-class etc. Repeat.

"Ambition" to *"drive change"* – business-like, robust. Not soft.

"Thrust" – good as well (but not always appropriate).

Invent new *"funds"* – focus on the 'how much' (large sums); deflect attention from 'why'.

UK *"experts"* (also world class) – intimidating. Shuts people up. Emphasise.

Building the *"ecosystem"* – apply the term to anything (finance, business, education). Vacuous but vaguely virtuous. DFID's three Vs. Perfect.

"Partnership" – as above (*"hand-in-hand"* is even better)

DFID's *"journey"* – hint of depth. Buddhist even. Better than institutional learning (which we don't do – see below)

This is a *"new approach"* and a new world – Year Zero. Lessons from the past will only get in the way of spending. So avoid.

"Smart" aid – as above, the past by implication was stupid

Oh, and the poor. Get them in at some point. With feeling. And do it early – otherwise it looks like tokenism (which we're against).

‘Licking the hand that feeds you’ ODI rebrands its values



Why is it that the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the UK’s self-styled “leading independent think-tank on international development”, has apparently so little to say about current developments in UK aid and especially in DFID?

ODI is an important and well-known organisation. Media-friendly and continually in the public view, its work is research-focused with a set of twelve core programmes, ranging from water policy and social protection to climate change and politics and governance. The largest of these programmes is its Centre for Aid and Public Expenditure (CAPE) whose aim is “to shape and drive the agenda for international development assistance” and is concerned with, among other issues, aid budgeting, delivery channels and instruments, and the future architecture of aid.

ODI therefore is concerned with wider development issues and with the specifics of aid as one means through which development objectives can be achieved. And so, given the vast changes in UK aid over the last few years – for example in contracting, budgets, processes and public profile – it might have been expected that this would be a key priority for its work. But what do we see?

*On the functionality of new aid processes and mechanisms (such as DFID's business case)
– nothing*

On the challenges of spending, and efficacy of, vastly increased budgets? – zilch

*On the effects of new incentives for DFID staff in a high-spend and politicised environment?
– nada*

*On DFID's marginalisation of 'evidence-based policy' – ODI's raison d'être and now exposed
as a sham by the recent ICAI report (see Section 3) – a fat zero*

*On these crunch issues – all-pervasive and self-evident to anyone involved in the aid game
in the UK – ODI is largely silent, scarcely acknowledging their existence, let alone uttering
the merest whisper of criticism of DFID.*

*Indeed when, in early April, it was confirmed by the National Office of Statistics that the UK's
aid expenditure had reached the 0.7% of gross national income 'target' set by the UN, the
ODI's Executive Director Kevin Watkins took to the airwaves to laud this as a "fantastic
achievement". Interestingly, last year's submission by ODI to the UK Parliament's
International Development Select Committee on the future of UK development assistance
("the current definition and target are no longer fit for purpose") contradicted Watkins'
enthusiastic line. But its general stance is beyond such nuance; ODI endorses the general
mantra within the development community that more must, unquestioningly, be better.*

Well, it's certainly been good for ODI.

*Its annual income in the year ending March 31st 2013 was £25.6m, double its value of five
years earlier. Staff numbers have also doubled to more than 200 and these are now resident
in ODI's spanking new, high-spec office in London's Blackfriars, a move which coincided
with a major rebranding investment, complete with new logo. Although its annual report is
somewhat coy about the specifics, most ODI funding comes from DFID. It is to DFID that
ODI owes its growth – and, funnily enough, it is the practices of DFID that remain out-of-
bounds to the analytical eye of the UK's big thinker on aid. It would seem that the new,
bigger and higher cost base ODI is wedded to a bigger DFID, and, de facto, must be loyal to
DFID's new ways.*

*Growth and new office buildings are not the only change that's taken place in ODI. The
organisation lists two of its core values as independence – being "independent from its*

fundings, and able to challenge donor thinking and policy” and sustainability – working in “a way that is sustainable, backed by commitment to its long-term viability”. Captured and compromised, snout securely in the donor trough, ODI has rather easily allowed the financial concerns of the latter to take precedence over the integrity inherent in the former. And allowed its insights to stay in the realm of safe and self-interested latte musings from the London development set.

ICAI scratches the surface of the DFID malaise

The recent report from the Independent Commission for Aid (ICAI) - “How DFID Learns” - is a damning indictment of the organisation’s approach to learning and evidence. But, although offering some insight into DFID’s dysfunctional ways, the report is as significant for the unanswered questions that arise from it as much as the conclusions it reaches.

The report sets out the sheer scale of DFID’s commitment to learning, whether through research, evaluations or the funding of resource centres. £1.2bn over the next five years, a flood of new evaluation staff, 425 separate evaluations currently underway or planned the issues around learning are not about resources. Rather they are about efficacy, culture and incentives. The report finds that DFID:

- “Does not clearly identify how its investment in learning links to its performance” – the gulf between “doing” and “thinking” persists. Previous reviews of DFID have made the same comment – but with research budgets doubling in five years, this functional divide is evermore stark.
- Staff “feel under pressure to be positive” in reporting results, with one head of department stating that “DFID does not fail”. In this context, spinning results and ignoring “inconvenient facts” are implicitly encouraged.
- Focuses too much on narrow “results” at the expense of learning about the “bigger picture” with a consequent “distortive effect” on the development process.

- Staff incentives to learn are variable and unclear. Illustrating how inconsequential learning is, DFID staff's learning and development budget for 2012/13 was 50% underspent.

The report's overall score of Amber-Red is the second lowest that theoretically could be awarded. But in practice, given the endless cycles of drafting and review that takes place in ICAI reports, which tend to dilute "extreme" findings, and the near impossibility, politically, of DFID being given the lowest score, this is about as bad as it can get for DFID, as close as we are likely to see to an official report saying that DFID – in relation to learning at least – is performing abysmally.

But actually it could have been worse. For reasons unknown, while acknowledging that contractors "generally have far greater insight and learning about their programmes than does DFID", ICAI did not draw on contractors in undertaking the review. Had they done so – and appropriate ways of guaranteeing anonymity offered - a harsher picture would have emerged. Contractors are at the sharp end of DFID demands for positive evidence – and all have their DFID tales to tell. Their inclusion would have allowed a bolder and more accurate assessment of the propensity of DFID to fix the evidence to justify actions. This doesn't just happen "sometimes" as the report states but is common. And in some country offices, such as Nigeria, is rife. Increasingly DFID inhabits a grey Campbell-land of quarter-truths, distortion and lies.

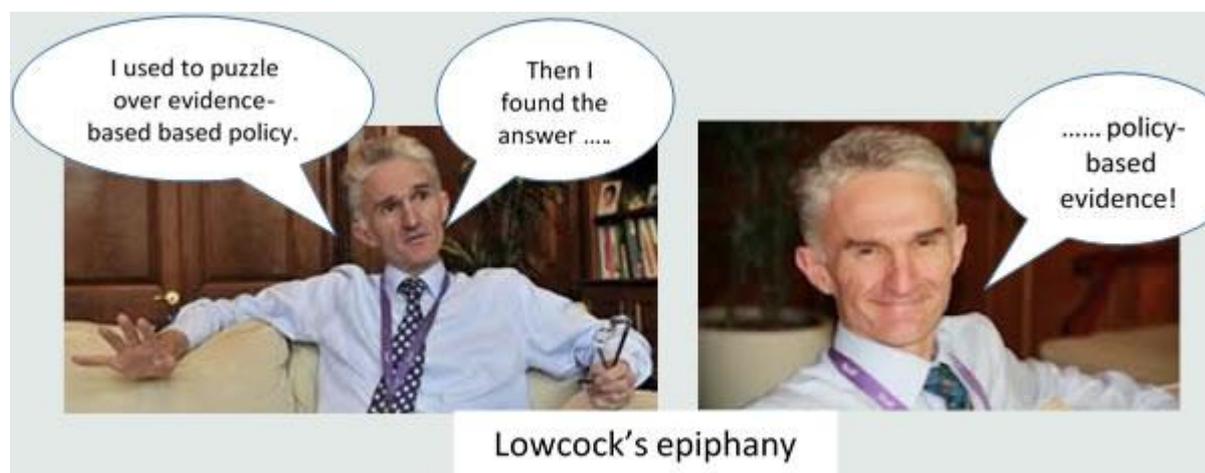
Contractors (and others) would also have struggled to recognise the report's depiction of DFID staff as a band of intellectually-curious tormented souls reaching out for knowledge. Eh? DFID?

However, the report's most serious weakness is in its analysis of incentives. It recognises that there are limited incentives to learn but makes no attempt to understand why this is the case. Or to develop a

fuller picture of the incentive structure shaping the organisation's culture and staff behaviour. Instead there is a rather plaintive request for "more effort ... to get the incentives right".

This is analysis as politician's soundbite – a kind of "Just sort it out John" tabloid cliché. What does "right" mean and why isn't "right" there just now would have been more relevant questions to ask.

Why doesn't DFID learn? Because ultimately, for staff, compared with spending your (large) budget, with value-for-money 'optics', with making sure that your project gets the right review score, with just getting on through to the next "thing", learning on the technical issues pertaining to development doesn't matter.



And where does that sense of priority come from? From the incentives, culture and task structure of the organisation set for it – like any organisation – by its senior management and its political masters.

In not probing the 'why question' on learning, and in not setting up an agenda for future investigations by the ICAI, the report is limited and partial. And lets DFID off the hook.

Compliance unit to crack down on unpatriotic naysayers

DFID is to set up a new "Flying the Flag Compliance Unit" to ensure that all its development partners take their "showing-the -Union Jack" responsibilities seriously.

This follows detailed instructions ("Standards for the use of the new UK aid logo") issued by DFID in June 2012 on the logo's use, including specifications on size, colour and exclusion space around its display and on when to use it (including on emergency aid supplies, uniforms of staff and on all deliverables). In modest tones, the instruction note sets out the reasons for the guidance "to ensure the UK gets the credit it deserves for the amazing work we do – work that is changing the lives of literally hundreds of millions of the world's poorest people".

A DFID spokesman commented, "We have no truck with those doubters and backsliders who whinge about damage to development relationships, processes and impact.

What's wrong with using our privileged historic position to sell UK plc assertively to some of the world's poorest people? We want them to align with our values after all"

"In fact", he went on "we see the need to exploit the full value potential of our brand by upping our Union Jack exposure through exciting innovations. For example, we're keen to encourage the observed trend among contractors for Union Jack tattoos. It's the kind of buy-in we want and a small but proud tattoo on the forearm is not much to ask. I know it has been suggested by some that forehead tattoos, especially for younger contractor staff, would be ideal. But that's obviously ridiculous! We're not unreasonable people!"

"However", he went on, reacting to reports that Union Jack buttock tattoos were now being proposed "that's the kind of half-hearted flabby response that just doesn't cut the mustard. So we're taking a strong line and saying a firm no to buttock tattoos for contractors".

The new unit, to be staffed by a small team of "eagle-eyed patriotic vigilantes", will look to take the flag revolution to other parts of DFID's work. It's understood that officials feel the new Adolescent Girls Initiative funded jointly with the Nike Foundation is ripe with opportunities. Explained a flushed DFID official "Tattooing has a role to play here. What with Nike's swoosh and DFID's Union Jack, two logos, one on each well, there are possibilities"

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"However", he went on, reacting to reports that Union Jack buttock tattoos were now being proposed "that's the kind of half-hearted flabby response that just doesn't cut the mustard. Officials also feel that DFID's work in education offers potential for good logo optics. Plans for Union Jacks to fly over supported schools are well-advanced and new guidelines will be developed on "how children should pay appropriate respect to the flag, at assemblies, mealtimes etc".

DFID have rejected any suggestion that the UK Aid logo and strapline ("From the British people") is yet another example of it slavishly copying USAID ("From the American people").

"Why it's completely different. Completely. After all, it's the Union Jack and we're British. We're DFID - and we're officially amazing".



Underneath the frameworks, contractors and DFID cosy-up

Framework contracts, central to DFID's quest to reconcile ever-bigger budgets and improved efficiency, have in practice become the means to restrict competition, reduce innovation and further line the pockets of large contractors. Under the guise of administrative efficiency, a convenient mutual dependence between donor and contractor has been fostered, delivering for the narrow objectives of both parties but at the expense of development outcomes.

The reasoning behind framework contracts is that by pre-qualifying a smaller number of players, the costs of individual contract procurement are reduced. DFID, under the present government, has enthusiastically embraced frameworks. It has nine sets of pooled consultants around themes such as governance, reproductive health and, one of the largest, wealth creation. Although exact numbers are difficult to pin down, certainly many hundreds of millions of pounds worth of aid business goes through framework arrangements.

What has been the impact of framework contracts thus far? A number of features stand out. First, competition has reduced. This is an inevitable consequence of frameworks but is happening in unexpected ways. For example, the wealth creation framework (WCF) contract has 25 contractors listed. Seven of these have never bid for contracts and another seven have never been successful. More recent contract competitions within WCF have only attracted two or three bidders. Self-evidently, competition within the WCF is stale and reducing as contractors, without fear of new entrants, pick their contract targets while others drop out.

The restructuring induced by WCF, as contractors position themselves in a lucrative, protected market, has also lowered competition. The eleven successful bidding companies has fallen to nine after two recent takeovers. DAI's purchase of HTSPE is of particular note. As one of the largest contractors in the world, they have been aggressive and successful in

winning DFID business in the last two years. Now with HTSPE in their stable, DAI control most of DFID's economic growth portfolio in at least two countries, Zambia and, DFID's largest recipient country, Ethiopia. More corporate manoeuvring in the WCF circle is likely.

Second, framework contracts have given official blessing to contractors' business model. The essence of this is to front-load effort on 'business acquisition' – winning bids – and accord less importance to implementation. Technically, contractors have become largely empty shells with the emphasis on in-house bid-writing and project/financial management capacities. They have little technical capacity of their own and no interest in developing this. Technical resources are bought-in or subcontracted from smaller firms, all of whom are easily expendable. The net effect has been to strengthen large contractors and the generic, delivery-oriented view of development they represent at the expense of development as a more innovative analysis-led process that addresses underlying constraints in a lasting manner, a view led by smaller players.

Third, framework contracts have brought DFID and contractor together in a back-scratching pact of mutual-dependence. The informal deal works something like this. DFID need to spend large budgets but also to demonstrate they are seeking value for money for taxpayers. In practice, this means DFID (and staff are given incentives for this) demand visible costs are cut – project staff positions are reduced, expenses scrutinised, tea conspicuously not given to visitors at DFID offices (oh yes) – encourage a new toughness (or at least rudeness) in staff, and require that contractors sign up to a new code of conduct (conversely increased mutual loathing is one aspect of the new relationship). Contractors, for their part, tolerate the new irritations of this relationship knowing that, once projects are won, they are relatively "safe". With a keen sense of the realpolitik of staff incentives, they know that DFID is unlikely to cancel a contract once awarded and, with limited institutional memory, "bad" performance in one project seldom affects decision-making on future DFID contracts. The new cosiness is manifested in regular official meetings between DFID and its Key Suppliers Group (no minutes are available for these) and in more unofficial meetings with Mark Lowcock, the Permanent Secretary of DFID.

And of course the deal with DFID works because of the lure of earnings offered by frameworks. For large contractors this is boom-time, an enriching, protected klondyke (see opposite). While DFID make much of better cost economy, their concerns are with only the peripheral froth of process. Contractors invent new budget lines and find new ways of squeezing margins from projects. Privately they find the idea that DFID's posturing on value for money might impact on their earnings to be naïve and risible.

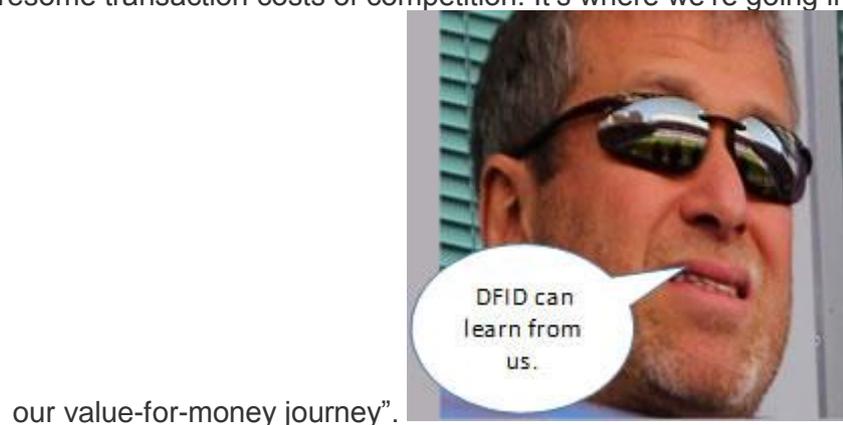
In all this, as with many other aspects of its operations, DFID is aping the long-held practice of USAID, where frameworks are the norm and most work is allocated to a small number of ‘Beltway Bandit’ contractors. In framework contracts DFID is also following an approach used by other UK government departments. The implicit assumption here is that, like transport and defence, development is something that DFID delivers and can be seen in the same contractual light as other ‘deliverables’ – which is odd given that the core of the development ethic is to enable other countries to deliver (not for donor countries to do it).

The above direct effects of framework contracts might be more justifiable if there was any evidence of ‘better development’ resulting from them. But there’s not – not one shred. On the contrary, many – such as Laurence Haddad, ex-head of the Institute of Development Studies – fret about the emerging lack of creativity and practical flexibility in the UK aid effort. And why should framework contracts be “good” for development? Contractors take their lead from DFID. And for DFID, framework contracts are all about shifting resources and, in politicised times, sending the right signals and optics about aid. Tough, efficient, delivering, spending. Saleable stories. Good development? Who’s interested in that?

Oligarchs are the way ahead says DFID

DFID’s current review of contracting mechanisms and partners is likely to recommend establishing a series of oligarchical arrangements. DFID officials see this as the way the organisation has, de facto, been going anyway and therefore to be a logical next step.

“There’s been much ill-informed chatter about oligarchs” said a DFID spokesman “but they’re misunderstood. Creating oligarchies in all our key areas of work will allow us to ruthlessly eliminate the tiresome transaction costs of competition. It’s where we’re going in



our value-for-money journey”.

“Really oligarchs are doing excellent work in many places such as in Eastern Europe and, indeed, in Kensington. They easily handle large volumes of money and, through their support for sports and charities, they give back to the community. It’s what we need.”

“What’s more, since most existing contractors already have well-appointed central London premises, they’re already beginning to fit the oligarch paradigm”.

Speaking from Bad Vlad’s, a club in London’s west end, the spokesman acknowledged that a move in this direction might be controversial but said DFID were determined to push on. “Yes, it’s bold and business-like – and not for liberal faint-hearts, thinkers and the like. But that’s the kind of go-getting action people we are”.

Snouts in the trough on the poverty frontline

With recent confirmation that the UK has succeeded in its aim of increasing aid spending to 0.7% of GDP, how is life now for aid’s tireless workhorses, the contractors? How are they faring in fulfilling their responsibility of servicing DFID’s frantic spending binge on the poverty frontline?

Adam Smith International (ASI) were DFID’s largest contractor (by value of contracts won) in 2011-12, the last years for which figures are available. Their work is mainly in the governance, public sector reform and economic development spheres. They are also a high profile organisation, achieving some notoriety in 2012 when the Daily Mail featured them in their “Fatcats of Foreign Aid” investigation, including an all-star rogue’s line up of their directors under the moniker “Barons of Poverty” and details of their seven-figure remuneration. Although with some distinctive characteristics, ASI can be seen as representative of contractors generally.

So, how have things been for the Barons? Well, all rather good actually. In fact, just peachy. In 2012, ASI’s sales were £72m, a rise of one-third on 2011, and almost twice their level of three years earlier, just before the Conservative came to power. Profits in 2012 stood at £6.9m, a rise of 80% in the same three-year period. Cash in the bank was almost £10m. Figures for 2013 are not yet available but sales are confidently expected by aid industry insiders to be over £100m. Financially ASI have trebled in size since 2009 and staff numbers doubled to around 60. Nearly all of this is attributable to DFID work.

How have ASI managed to weather the storm after the “difficult” publicity of less than two years ago?

Their excellent networks certainly will have helped. ASI are an active player in DFID’s Key Suppliers Group. Less formally but potentially more important are their political ties with the Government. Peter Young, Director of Strategy and Operations and the founding father of ASI, has strong connections with the Conservative Party. In the 1980s he was President of the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS), known for their extreme views, riotous

behavior and penchant for 'Hang Mandela' chanting. Eventually the group was closed down by the Party Chairman Norman Tebbit.

At the other end of the Tory spectrum, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, ex-Foreign Secretary, and someone oozing respect and authority in the Party, is also an ASI director. All in all, there is an unusual political chumminess between ASI and the Government.

And supplementing political networks, ASI has also set about rebuilding its brand. For example, it is one of the sponsors of the Guardian's Global Development Professional Networks which, among other features, provides for a number of ASI-sponsored articles to be published each year.

How different are ASI from other contractors? There are some differences. ASI is an independent company, highly dependent on DFID. Other contractors tend to be part of bigger global groups – GRM, Coffey and Cardno all have Australian corporate parents while DAI and Nathans have US headquarters – which also make their finances more opaque. Some key players – such as the conglomerate Mott McDonald and DAI – are also employee-owned but this makes them no less stridently bottom-line focused than their peers.

ASI's spectacular DFID-fuelled growth may also not have been mirrored in all their competitors – but such has been the avalanche of new funding, and the protection provided by frameworks, that most have grown significantly. Differences are in degree not kind. And for most, snouts in the trough, swilling around in unprecedented levels of cash, times have never been as good.

Luvvies, pseuds and sainted ones

Mystics and bollocks: members of the SEEP Network's – "the largest global network of international practitioner organisations dedicated to combating poverty" – Market Facilitation Initiative (MaFI) may have been slightly surprised recently to see its coordinator award himself the title "Social Alchemist".

However, perhaps a clue is provided in MaFI's current consultation process where its members are debating a new paper on "inclusive market systems". This contains a 100-word definition, the essence of which is "A market system is a dynamic space ..." in which "... actors collaborate, coordinate and compete", is composed of "... vertically and horizontally linked firms end markets, input and support service markets" and includes "socio-cultural, geographic and political factors, infrastructure and institutions".

So, that's all pretty clear then.

In that context, the work of the development social alchemist is self-evident. While their medieval brethren sought to transform important base metals into a material more precious (gold), today's mystical workers take important functioning approaches and turn them into something apparently more prized - incomprehensible bollocks.

Maoism and hand-wringing: Engineers Without Borders' (EWB) recent innovations to encourage more candid assessment of experience and learning – "Admitting Failure" and "Failure Forward" – fit well with a wider strand of tradition among development NGOs which regards self-flagellation and earnest confession and counselling as an essential part of the development process. Younger failure advocates may not realise, however, that theirs is only the latest manifestation of leftist agonising.

Self-criticism has always been a key element of communist practice. Compare: from Failure Forward - "We need to build a safe space to discuss failures openly and maximize the learning we gain from them", with, from collective confessions in Cambodia in 1970 (cited by Francois Bizot), "Comrades, we must cleanse ourselves of the repeated sins that accumulate and slow down our beloved revolution". Of course, past admission of failure among the hard left usually was a tad edgier, inevitably resulting in the identification, humiliation and punishment of wayward leaders. But perhaps this is a direction of travel for EWB to consider for the development field? That of course and the compulsory wearing of Maoist pyjamas.

Setting the bar for selfless celebs: Sports Relief's annual jamboree in March had the usual collection of celebs out in force to do their (highly visible) bit for good causes. In this case, most activity involved acts of derring-do, funnies and bizarre challenges from actors, TV and sporting stars. It was left to David Tennant to play the necessary serious part – interspersing stories of "progress" from Sierra Leone, moments of welling sincerity and obligatory crowds of excited smiling kids (all apparently keen Dr Who historians).

But Tennant, and all his celebrity peers, will have to go further to reach the dizzy heights for acts of selfless 'making-a-difference' giving set by an earlier visitor to Sierra Leone, an episode still mentioned with hushed awe in luvvie circles. Actress Salma Hayek's visit in 2009, highlighting mother and child healthcare, contained several familiar ingredients - celeb communing with mothers, celeb in tears, grateful children proffering grateful thanks to celeb, celeb hugging excited children, celeb having-a-go at vaccination etc. But it rose to another level when Hayek decided to breast feed a baby she encountered that was apparently hungry.

Fortunately for the waiting world, the whole event was covered by the several camera crews in attendance. And the message from their pictures seems clear, and only a slight variant of

the enduring luvvie principle of “if in doubt, get them out”: for lactating women of the world to ‘Do a Salma’, unleash their bosoms and do their bit for Africa.

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