

ActionAid International
Taking Stock II
A Reflection on ActionAid International's
Work
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Introduction

This report deals with my general observations on ActionAid International's staff, working style; the challenges FPT and rights based approach have created; and my reflections on some reflective questions raised by the International Directors and other members of the AAI staff during the period of this review. It should be read as a companion piece to my first report, which focuses on ActionAid's gender and women's rights work. The terms of reference given to me by AAI were:

“ As team member your particular focus will be on Asia, gender issues, women's rights. You will be responsible for considering the aspects of this work that relate to gender issues and women's rights throughout the organization.”

However, because gender, poverty, human rights are all integrally connected the team decided that in addition to our particular focus, the team members should/may give their views on Fighting Poverty Together, rights, partnership, Internationalisation etc.

It is necessary to add here that although I AM making suggestions, I do not feel right making recommendations on every or most points. I do not feel right because:

- ❑ It is not easy for me to assume I can make specific recommendations after such a short interaction with AAI
- ❑ I find there are enough people within AAI who know much more and know better. Also because earlier reviews have done this and quite well too
- ❑ The observations, questions and comments clearly point out what is required. If AAI wants it can take necessary actions on the basis of the observations, and finally
- ❑ I feel many concrete recommendations made by TS1 were not followed through. Maybe they were not doable or not worth doing. So, AAI knows better!!

I have tried to write the report in a style and language which is accessible. This is one of the reasons for its length.

To English speaking/writing people I must apologise for my English. This language continues to be my step mother (ly) tongue!! May be, as a feminist I should be saying “English is my step fatherly tongue, never quite in control. Always giving trouble.

1. The Steep Climb of Fighting Poverty Together (FPT)

By evolving and then accepting FPT as its official article of faith and policy, AAI has set its goals and standards very high. It is ambitious, brave and very challenging to decide that AAI will, amongst other things:

- ❑ Fight poverty
- ❑ Fight the causes of poverty and not just its symptoms

- ❑ Fight poverty through partnerships
- ❑ Follow a rights based approach, not charity or welfare approach
- ❑ Address gender inequalities as a central, cross cutting issue
- ❑ Undertake policy and advocacy work, etc.

These intents and declarations demand not changes, but TRANSFORMATIONS in everything-policies, strategies, processes, analysis, and methods of working, relationships. They require a complete transformation in the mindset of AAI staff.

FPT turns AAI into an activist and political (desirous of changing power equations) organization. In my opinion after accepting the framework of FPT, there should be no further debate on AAI's identity i.e. whether AAI is an activist organization or a Northern donor. The adoption of FPT has created very BIG challenges for AAI. The declared values and principles pose challenges not just for the skills and competencies of AAI staff, but also to their personal values, attitudes and behaviour. Fighting poverty in partnership requires most challenging transformations:

- ❑ In the way AAI staff relates to its work. AAI work can no more be just a job. It has to be a political commitment for everyone, not just the senior management.
- ❑ In the **relationships** within the organization. Staff members should ideally become political activists and hence partners/comrades. Notions of equality, mutual respect, acceptance of diversity etc. have to begin permeating the organization.
- ❑ In the styles of **leadership**. Collective and participatory leadership has to become an aspiration and practice
- ❑ In the way AAI staff members **think about and relate to the “poor” women and men** and their communities. In the FPT framework the poor cannot be beneficiaries, target groups or objects. They become the main agents and vehicles of change and they become partners. Since the policy to challenge and change structures of power puts their lives at risk, the “poor” and their organizations have to be the main decision makers and agenda setters and not AAI staff
- ❑ In the way men and women staff **relate to and treat each other**. Accepting human rights of all and gender equality as values, demands fundamental changes in the attitudes and behaviour of people and in the language, culture and policies of the organization.
- ❑ In the **understanding and analysis of the AAI** team. Fighting causes of poverty and patriarchy requires **deep and sharp analysis** and it requires a **shared analysis**. Not just clear, sharp thinking, but holistic, synthetic, complex thinking is required to implement the brave vision of AAI. AAI staff have to be able to look at fragments of realities and recognize patterns in them. Thinking of the kind Allan Kaplan¹ says permeated AAI earlier, needs to be slowly given up. *“The kind of thinking which revels in lists, which insist on logical frameworks, quantitative analysis and reporting, boxes, compartments, tables. The tendency is towards reduction of complexity and nuance and contradiction to lowest common*

¹ Lessons from ActionAid Uganda's experience of changes in development practice by Tina Wallace and Allan Kaplan 2003 (published by AAI Impact Assessment Unit)

denominators of facts and numbers which can be perused and assessed in the quickest possible time with the least amount of effort". As Allan Kaplan goes on to say "AAI must give to its field workers the tools and space to begin thinking with an intelligence that does not shy away from the nuanced ambiguities of life itself". Challenging indeed!

- ❑ In the way AAI **thinks of and relates to Community based organisations (CBOs), NGOs, social movements, other donors etc.** The donor-donee relationship and competitor relationships with others, by definition have to become things of the past.
- ❑ In the **structures and systems** of AAI. Openness, transparency, dialogue, flexibility, listening, being in tune with the external realities become the key words.

The above are just a few illustrations of the challenges AAI has created for itself. Such challenges **cannot be imposed on the staff**. They have to be accepted and **owned**. And even when FPT principles are owned by all, its meaningful implementation requires tremendous **efforts for collective rethinking, retraining and reorganization**. It requires huge **investments in perspective and team building** and these in turn require considerable resources.

1.1 Is FPT Unique?

It is relevant to reflect on this question because some people in AAI often claimed the uniqueness of FPT, sometimes openly, at other times less openly. For AA FPT is indeed unique, new and a huge transformation. From being an organization largely focused on child sponsorship, service delivery, direct implementation, to becoming an organization focusing on rights, fighting poverty, working through partnerships, doing policy, research and advocacy is a very big step.

However, in the development world, this approach is neither new nor unique. In fact, AAI took a fairly long time to learn from others and change. Development organizations of/in the South and North have been working with and evolving all these principles for a very long time. It is the innovative and experimental work of a large number of Southern organizations supported by many Northern organizations (like Oxfam, Christian Aid, BFW, NOVIB, Quakers) which have led to the present acceptance of concepts like participatory and people centred development, rights based approach, gender equity and equality, PRA, research and advocacy etc. Many of the approaches being implemented now in AAI Development Initiatives (DIs) have been tried and evolved since the late 70s. Amazing work has been done for a long time on research and advocacy. In South Asia the work of organizations like BRAC, Gonshasthya Kendra, Nijera Kori, SEWA, Fish workers Organization, Eklavya, SFDP, Nepal, and People's Union of Civil Liberties, to name but a few, have been exemplary. Innovations have been done in all sectors – education, health, employment generation, people's knowledge and people's science, housing, sanitation, water conservation etc.

In fact in many ways the voluntary work earlier was much more radical. The sustained efforts by these organizations at the grassroots and policy levels, at the local and global, micro and macro levels, forced governments, UN and bilateral organizations, even the World Bank, to change their thinking, policies and strategies. It is important to recognize, learn from and build on these earlier efforts.

However, what is remarkable about AAI is the seriousness with which it is going about the business of transforming itself and implementing FPT. The efforts are genuine and sustained. In education (REFLECT) and in learning and accountability (ALPS) its work is impressive. During the shameful attacks on minorities in Gujarat, the positions taken by the Country Director of AA India was remarkable. And equally remarkable are hundreds of others small and big efforts being made by AAI in over 35 countries.

1.2 Impressive Competence, Engagement and Commitment of AAI Workers and Teams

In every country visited, we were impressed by the competence, engagement and commitment of the women and men working with AAI. Many were also very sensitive, compassionate and passionate about their work and mission. It was evident that AAI has been able to attract into its fold many well-known and highly respected activists, development researchers, analysts and planners. These people have raised the image of AAI as a serious and committed actor for people's development and power. Most staff members have a sense of ownership of FPT and the values and strategies connected with it.

In spite of the fact that AAI has been in a period of change, even turmoil, most people we talked to found their work challenging and satisfying. Most respected AAI's vision and mission. Many said they joined AAI because it is non-denominational, its a learning organization, its flexible, it provides space for innovation, for individual growth and space even to make mistakes. This by no means, means they find AAI a perfect organization.

The presentations made by the staff were mostly of high quality and they were mostly made with a sense of confidence and engagement. One could sense people were involved with what they were doing. For many, working with AAI was a mission and not just a job.

We found a large number of well-written, reflective documents. Some documents on national and international realities and policies were particularly impressive.

The atmosphere in the different offices was different. Some were more informal, friendly, and joyous than others. Some were less hierarchical and there was a sense of partnership and camaraderie between all levels and classes of workers. In some women continue to do all the serving of tea/coffee and taking of messages and orders. In some, there was more freedom and equality for everyone to speak. In some, drivers joined the rest of us for eating and meetings. In other country programmes, this did not happen. But no office was below average in terms of efficiency, competence and a sense of purpose and partnership.

Barring a few individuals, every team we met was open to reflection, dialogue and to positive and constructive criticism. Because of this, interaction with AAI teams and partners and reading most AAI documents was a pleasure and a learning experience.

1.3 Brave Handling of the Challenges Thrown Up by FPT

FPT is still quite new. It was almost a complete break from the earlier thinking and strategies of AA. FPT required major changes, even transformation, in policies, practices, fund raising messages and strategies, relationships, both internal and external. For some teams (e.g. some staff heavy DAs, marketing teams in UK and Italy) the changes required were bewildering. Yet, we found that within a period of less than five years most teams were coping well. They had managed to rise to the big challenges even though they demanded monumental changes. Of course some have done much better than the others (mainly) because of the vision, personality and commitment of the CD.

AA Uganda's ceaseless efforts are particularly well known and documented. To quote Allan Kaplan: *"In AA Uganda there was a real story of transformation, rigidity into fluidity, unthinking obedience into creative innovation, patrimony into service, imposition into responsiveness, package into respectful process, a culture of following into conscious leadership"*. Two years of creative, sensitive reflection and team building work made this transformation possible. Success is indeed possible if we trust people's abilities to evolve and if we facilitate the process of growth, growth in individual and collective thought and action.

Not just in Uganda, everywhere we went, we found teams who have been trying hard to transform themselves into the FPT mode. We also realized its not easy for organizations and people to shed old ways of thinking, behaving, planning, implementing, reviewing. This is why the efforts being made were more commendable. We found every team attempting the following with different degrees of conceptual understanding, organizational preparedness, commitment and success.

- ❑ Becoming a **learning**, changing and growing organization
- ❑ Taking bold steps of **restructuring country offices** and development areas/projects (DAs). Somewhere it meant reducing the team by half (Kenya), somewhere doubling it (Italy)
- ❑ Evolving a **gender policy** and a policy against sexual harassment. Initiating discussion and some action on work life balance
- ❑ Working **WITH** people rather than **FOR** them
- ❑ Becoming **catalysts**, supporters and **advocates** rather than direct implementers
- ❑ **Supporting existing CBOs** consisting of women and men and where necessary helping create new ones and building their capacities to envision plan and implement their own development initiatives rather than delivering services.
- ❑ Becoming **advocates of people's rights** and helping people to demand and fight for **"getting rice and gaining rights"** or combining basic needs and rights based approach. Thousands of projects are going on everywhere to help women, men and children gain access to basic needs, livelihoods and services.
- ❑ **Listening to people living** in poverty and helping their voices reach policy and decision making people and fora.
- ❑ Including women in most development initiatives and organizations and raising (some) **gender issues like** violence against girls and women, women's land rights, women's participation in politics etc
- ❑ **Researching and raising** issues related to some of the most **marginalized communities** and working for their betterment, dignity and empowerment
- ❑ **Combining field level work** and issues with **policy level work** and issues. Based on their field level experiences and insights AAI teams are advocating (along with others) for policy changes in education, child rights, food rights, youth affairs, shelters for the homeless, trafficking of girls and women, agriculture (sugar, cashew, cotton production and trade in Kenya), NGO policies etc. Their fieldwork provides the AAI teams the knowledge, authority and legitimacy to

advocate on behalf of the oppressed, exploited, excluded and marginalized communities.

- ❑ Supporting and/or **creating networks of CBOs and NGOs** to negotiate with governments, big donors and international finance institutions etc.
- ❑ Making local **government structures more responsive** to people's needs and aspirations rather than replacing government structures. AAI and its teams are clear that the State **MUST** continue to work for the "poor" women and men
- ❑ Supporting and or creating **thematic networks** and fora at the local, national and international levels, to advocate for policy changes in areas like education, food rights, HIV/AIDS, trade, women's rights, rights of minorities etc.
- ❑ Initiating work on **corporate responsibility**
- ❑ Trying to understand the principles and processes of **internationalization** and internalizing this principle in their thoughts, work and aspirations
- ❑ Publishing some **excellent books like** Listening to People Living in Poverty, Good Governance, Economic Globalization Today, to educate and initiate debates published by Books for Change, India
- ❑ Using **print and electronic media** to raise people's issues, to publicize innovative work being done and much more

These and others not mentioned are no mean achievements. They show the commitment and seriousness of AAI leadership and teams. Examples of these are available in all AAI reports and reviews.

There has been a good amount of innovation and experimentation by AAI and its partners. Reflect, Stepping Stones, ALPS, partners like Books for Change in India, work with school girls, sugar farmers in Kenya, Action Zone and Azione Donna in UK and Italy and many others are there to see. A great deal of learning has taken place within AAI. Some of it has been documented and shared. The "Taking of the Horizon" report on the efforts of AA Uganda, documents on Reflect and Stepping Stones, development education materials developed by AAUK and being used by a large number of schools in UK are very inspiring. However, along with many sparks of brilliance and success stories, which are quoted everywhere in prominently placed boxes, there are also many less than average programmes and partnerships.

1.4 Achievements of FPT

It was purely by chance that I saw a TV programme on AA Ethiopia's work with communities. A song a group of women was singing in the programme sums up what AAI work has meant for millions of people AAI is working with. The song said *"the coming of AA in our lives is like the rising of the sun"*.

Lives of a large number of people have indeed changed for the better. Communities have water, food, and healthier animals. Their children, including girls, have some education. Women have access to some income generation activities, to market places, government offices and schemes, to decision making fora. Women's work has more visibility and they have more dignity. There is open discussion and beginnings of actions against violence against women and girls, violence against minorities, exclusion of certain special groups, all of which are closely interlinked with poverty. The most marginalized and excluded are getting organized to fight for more space, a bigger voice, for more choices. In Yem, Ethiopia within two years 29 CBOs have flourished and they are planning and implementing their own development programmes. About 80000 people are benefiting directly or indirectly from the work of this Development Initiative (DI). In Kenya, small and marginal farmers are getting

organized for improving their cashew production and negotiating better prices. Sugar farmers are waging bigger and tougher struggles for getting policies changed in favour of the poor. Small farmers in Ethiopia (men and women) have got together to prevent and treat livestock disease and death caused by tse tse flies. In India, tribals and Dalits are getting organized to gain access to resources, rights, dignity and participation in decision-making fora. In Vietnam small farmers are benefiting from irrigation schemes, families are getting cleaner water for household use, women have access to micro credit.

My visits to a few field level programmes in four countries confirm the claims made by AAI of reaching 13 million poor women, men, girls and boys in three continents. This is indeed creditable.

1.5 Some Important, but Unintended Benefits of AAI's Work

I doubt if AAI ever planned it this way or thought it was going to provide exciting work opportunities to hundreds of non-poor women and men in over 35 countries of the world. But this is exactly what it has also done.

Whenever and wherever I had a few minutes with AAI staff in the six countries I visited, I asked them if and why they liked working with AAI. Most people said they really enjoyed their work. It gave them a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Two young women in ActionAid Italy told me she used to work in the corporate sector. She left those jobs to join AAI Italy because they wanted to give meaning and value to their work and life. *"I wanted to work for people and just for profit"* both of them said in different meetings with me. This was inspiring to hear.

Another young employee, a man this time, said he had joined AAI because he needed a job, but now he enjoys his work very much. *"Here the relationship with people is different. It is a personal relationship, not a client relationship"*.

An Indian management expert had a good job in a big company. After some years he chucked it and joined AA India *"to do something meaningful in life"*. He has never looked back, in spite of the fact that he sees many weaknesses in AAI's work.

A young man in Kenya, hardly 28 and leading a Regional Office, seems smitten or possessed by the work he is doing. He is bubbling with new ideas to fight injustice and impoverishment. You can almost see the energy of his ideas. A member of TS2 team asked him, what according to him was ActionAid? What kind of organization". The answer was *"I think AA is a religion"*. Quite an involvement! Quite a View!

To my question, why they liked working with AAI, the answers were, because:

- It works with people
- It is non denominational
- It has a flexible and evolving approach
- It provides space for you to learn and grow, even to make mistakes
- It allows people from the South to be in senior positions

There are few things more precious in life than having a meaningful job, being paid to do something you believe in and enjoy; an earning opportunity which you can be proud of; a job which can contribute to justice and equality and make our world a

better place for all. AAI has provided such precious job opportunities to many people and this is no mean achievement.

It is to AA's credit that it has attracted some well known and highly respected, feminist activists, writers, researchers, administrators, and human rights activists to its fold. The relationship between these people and AAI is mutual, the benefits are shared. It is a partnership to make "Another World Possible"

1.6 Some Observations on AAI Campaigns for FPT

For AAI campaigns are essential to take FPT forward. Most AAI campaigns are well thought out and well argued. The perspective of the campaigns and their strategies are quite remarkable. All of them follow a rights based approach and have an international perspective. Gender is addressed adequately in some and less adequately in others. For example, education and HIV/AIDS campaign documents have a gender perspective, but Food Rights Campaign documents very little.

Reading the policy and strategy papers on AAI campaigns, some of which are of extremely high quality and also very inspiring, produced the following questions in my mind:

- ❑ To what extent do all staff members actually understand campaigns and are involved in them?
- ❑ To what extent do all AAI staff own campaigns and issues?
- ❑ To what extent are campaigns related to programmes?
- ❑ To what extent do staff members understand policy documents? The style and language of these documents is not easy to understand. It is unlikely that even mid-level staff can understand them. The language and style of some of these documents in my opinion, could not pass the test of AAI's opening statement in the preamble of Action Aid Open Information Policy, "Action Aid believes that timely free flow of information in **accessible language, form, format** is essential for ensuring accountability, learning trust and good performance."

The language, style and level of conceptualization of these documents do not seem to be suitable for sharing even with all the AA staff. In their present form, they can definitely not be shared with poor and marginalized people and their communities. The concepts and frameworks used in most policy documents require a lot of unpacking to make them accessible to most AAI staff in country programmes. It does not look as if AAI spends enough time and resources to explain the campaigns to all their staff. I also did not see any or many translations into local languages of any materials. Therefore, the campaigns seem to be **parallel activities rather than integrated** into the day to day work and thinking of AAI in the field.

Another legitimate concern expressed by a Trustee, several AAI staff members and some partners was that **AAI might be spreading itself too thin**. In their opinion AAI should consolidate those campaign where it has expertise and has made some progress.

In India, several people pointed out that some campaigns were started without much preparation and inadequate participation of staff members and partners. It is wiser to have some successful campaigns than to see skeletons of many lying around here and there, soon after they are started.

In campaigns like the one with Manual Scavengers in India, some partners felt and I agree with them, alternative livelihoods should have been planned, before the community was asked to give up scavenging. I was told, a large number of women who gave up scavenging as a result of this campaign have no alternative livelihood. This can damage not only the present campaign but also all future campaigns on the issue.

Gender concerns and issues need to be better integrated in all campaigns. (There is more on this in my Gender & Women's Rights report)

As campaigns require partnerships with many at many levels the questions raised on partnership elsewhere in the following section are relevant here too.

1.7 Partnerships for FPT

AAI's new approach is to build partnerships to fight poverty. Different kinds of partnerships are being formed from the local to the global level, with different kinds of organizations-local CBOs, NGOs, schools, youth groups, local government departments, national governments, networks, alliances, bilateral and multilateral donors, UN agencies etc.

These partnerships are for different purposes, like providing basic services (education, water, roads, food) doing action research, claiming rights, doing advocacy for policy changes. Every country programme we visited is working with hundreds of partners. Together these partners are initiating and leading campaigns: on education (Elimu-Yetu Network, Education for All); women's rights, water and food rights, HIV/AIDS, rights of CBOs and NGOs. In every country we visited there are NGO coalitions at the national and regional levels to take up issues related to NGO policies, representation of NGOs in policy making bodies, minority rights (in Ethiopia and India), on manual scavenging (In India), on migrant labour (India), street children (Ethiopia, Kenya, India) on debt, fair trade, WTO, GMOs and on many other issues.

AAI, like other similar NGOs, is trying to bring like-minded people together not just within but also between countries. Large numbers of people in the North including school children and youth are being involved in development issues and campaigns. Child sponsorship is slowly being transformed into Next Steps, which is inviting people to become partners in FPT.

This kind of globalization of people to fight poverty, injustice and war is the only answer to the neo-imperialist globalization. The efforts being made are many, serious and commendable.

1.8 Partnerships Not Without Problems

All human relationships are power relationships because as soon as two people come together resources, work and decision making have to be shared. Creating genuine and equal partnerships is therefore, always a challenge.

Problems in AAI partnerships at all levels were both reported and visible.

1.8.1 Partnerships within AAI

Intra organizational partnerships are most important to carry forward the mandate of any organization. Like all organizations, including families, there are problems and tension in partnerships. Those mentioned were:

- ❑ The style of functioning in AAI is very hierarchical, vertical and centralised. There is a lot of talk about power, control, manipulation, grades, line of reporting.
- ❑ Country Directors and DA/DI managers are very powerful and some times authoritarian. (But many people also said AAI gives a lot of flexibility, freedom, openness and space to innovate.)
- ❑ The new vision, mission and objectives of FPT were imposed on the field level staff. They did not feel consulted. They were not given much help to understand and implement them. *“Some campaigns just arrive and we have to implement them even though we do not understand them”.*

1.8.2 Money Based Partnerships with CBOs and NGOs

Funding relationship often creates hierarchies. Those who give funds normally assume more power to set the rules and implement them. Although most partners were appreciative of most aspects of their partnership with AAI, some felt AAI imposes very rigid financial reporting systems. Showing me a 203-page photocopy, a partner said, they want photocopies of bills of even a cup of coffee. *“Sometimes we get the feeling AAI thinks all its partners are corrupt”.*

Another partner felt ideas for new AAI campaigns and new approaches are imposed from above. There is no partnership in deciding the direction of work. Local CBOs and NGOs are expected to just follow.

1.8.3 Partnerships with Other Like Minded Resource Agencies

Because those in the same countries have to compete for funds, the sense of competition becomes stronger than the sense of partnership. They have to bid for the same contracts, capture the same “consumers” for their “products” for fund raising. They do “head hunting” in the same areas. They “fish” for each others’ competent staff with attractive baits. In fact in some CPs, AAI has been a big loser in this. Because its’ staff are well trained, they have been hired by ADB, UN agencies and others.

A man who used to be in several senior positions in AAI remarked: *For raising funds there has to be a lot of self projection, self selling and labelling.....AAI’s brand name and its visibility are important”.*

He further said, *“There is always a desire to be seen as the biggest lead player, to be visible, bigger. This leads to aggressive self display. This has contributed to the fact that AAI’s PR is much better than its practice in the programmes”.*

In country after country I found there was hardly any collaboration between donors at the local/district level. Several donors were working in the same area, on the same issues without any cooperation. At the national level they are part of same fora, but not at the local level, where cooperation would make a big difference.

1.8.4 Partnerships in Campaigns

In its policy statements, AAI repeatedly states that success of campaigns depends on partnerships at all levels, local, national and international. However, it was both noticed and pointed out that several statements and actions of AAI betray a desire to project AAI rather than project the issues and all the partners involved in the campaign. For instance, I was told, in the Food Rights Campaign AAI takes independent positions and advocates in its own name rather than taking positions on behalf of larger alliances. AAI funded the travel of social movement people to Cancun but they had different positions on issues.

AAI got a whole review done to see how visible and successful AAI was at Cancun, not how visible and successful the partners were or how visible the cause or the voices of the "poor" were. There seems to be a sense of competition rather than cooperation and partnership with others working on the same issues. These examples do not indicate maximization of benefits or creation of synergies to make advocacy more effective. Forming consensus is indeed difficult but how can structural changes be achieved without consensus? Policies like partnership, internationalization or making globalization work for the poor, would require much more consensus building efforts and projecting issues rather than individual identities.

The document International Food Right Campaign Team Self Evaluation mentions several times "built AA profile", "raised AA profile" leaving a funny taste in the mouth. The language of the document often betrays the desire to take credit for work done by many partners. One external stakeholder said: *"Sometimes even the work of eminent persons and/or of organizations campaigning on issues for a long time is claimed as AAI achievement, just because some funds were given for this work"*.

The desire to put AAI "name tags" on every thing/activity has been noticed and commented upon. Ongoing people's struggles are suddenly being rechristened, as "AA campaigns" is a statement I heard.

At both Asia Social Forum and World Social Forum in Mumbai, campaigns were identified as AA campaigns (by putting up bill boards and banners). Rather than as campaigns of CBOs, local NGOs etc. Involved in a similar game of building brand names and self projection, some other donors had given T-shirts with their own names and logos to everyone they had given a travel grant to. Partnership or private ownership? Don't these examples (trends?) go completely against the AAI value of humility and its principles of partnership and internationalization? These tendencies do not strengthen campaigns, which can only be built on genuine, strong and equal partnerships.

The above examples demand deeper and honest discussion on the concept of partnership, power, ownership etc. Since FPT cannot be achieved without partnerships, more work is required on partnership and power at the conceptual and practical level.

2. Rights Based Approach Getting Integrated But Not Everywhere and Too Slowly

In the AAI documents, language of the staff and in many programmes, one can see the rights based approach (RBA) is quite well integrated. There is ample evidence of AAI reaching some extremely marginalized and impoverished communities; women's groups, street children, sex workers, migrant workers and these and other groups getting organized to identify and claim their rights, services, resources and their voice in decision making fora.

Adoption of the RBA created huge challenges for the Marketing Departments in countries raising funds because of the obvious contradictions between RBA and child sponsorship. The way the fund raising teams have risen to this challenge is impressive. The approach to marketing messages and communication with donors is being changed, but slowly, because messages like "vulnerability", "poverty", "illiteracy", "children waiting for your help" etc. are more effective in moving people's hearts. It is understandable that the pace of change is slow. If these changes towards Next Step in UK, Azione Donna (Action Women) in Italy can move forward steadily, the benefits will be many for North-South partnership towards fighting poverty together. Hopefully AAI will also attract new donors who are more interested in long term solutions to problems than in charity. There are enough people in the North who are also interested in global peace, sustainable development and who support and partner with organizations like Amnesty International, Green Peace, Oxfam etc. and who have been filling the streets of London, Rome, Florence in protest against WTO, G8, Iraq War and many other issues.

RBA has also permeated the AAI campaigns on education, HIV/AIDS, food rights, women's rights. New partnerships have been formed with marginalized communities, sex workers, shelter less people and they are being helped to fight for their rights. More policy and advocacy work is being done to change macro policies in favour of the poor.

2.1 Some Questions on RBA in AAI

However, I have the same questions on the integration of RBA in AAI as several reviews and the AAI Annual Report 2003 have raised. The understanding on rights seems uneven. In some programmes, RBA is well understood and implemented well. In other places, the understanding is quite shallow, where RBA seems more a slogan than a politically understood concept and practice. As with poverty so with rights, one first has to understand the structures and forces that have deprived the "poor" of their rights. There was little evidence of such discussions, research etc. In many places, the same old service delivery programmes are being couched in rights language without meaningful changes in analysis or approach. Power relations at the local level were not even mentioned in many discussions.

Very few people I met have ever received any inputs on RBA. The International Policy Division Rights Advisors confirmed the complete inadequacy of staff trained on rights and devoting their time for RBA. Concepts and principles of rights, gender equality, and pluralism are extremely political concepts. They challenge many of our traditional ways of thinking and working. Those who understand these well, have taken years if not decades to achieve their present level of understanding and commitment. Hence, how can the AAI staff be expected to understand and internalize these just from a few policy documents?

RBA has been successfully incorporated by those AAI staff that came with or had the motivation to achieve this understanding. This is more a result of personal commitment than of institutionalized inputs and help.

I did not see any or enough simply written (not simplistic) attractively produced, inspiring pamphlets to help AAI field staff understand RBA, causes of poverty, power strategies to transform power relations and structures. Such reading materials can become constant companions of the staff and meaningful gifts for partners.

I feel, the continued and widespread use of words like poor and poverty militate against RBA. Aren't these conservative, misleading terms, which do not encourage critical analysis of processes and power structures, engaged in "wars against the poor"?

2.2 Lack of Clarity, Sharp Analytical Tools and Preparation for RBA and FPT

Attempts are indeed being made to go the RBA route and in many places RBA is being quite well integrated, but at other places it is neither understood nor practiced. Whether the practice has changed or not, the language of rights is being used liberally. In several projects I visited, services were being delivered like a drop-in-place for street children, saving groups, water groups, but there was no evidence of RBA.

In two meetings, one in India and one in Vietnam, I found a tendency to blame the victims (mainly women) for their situation. There was little understanding and appreciation of deep rooted structures of exploitation, oppression, social, cultural and political exclusion. Such talk by the field staff in the context of Musahars and manual scavengers was distressing because at the level of policy papers everything is well formulated and politically very correct. This proves what has been said in most earlier reviews and by many AAI people to us about the lack of preparation of the staff through discussions, trainings, reading materials on power structures, power relations, rights, gender, diversity etc. Some staff members in the field said they had no time to read and reflect. All their time is spent "doing" things and making others "reflect". One of the International Directors kept emphasizing the lack of sharp analysis within AAI. There is not even appropriate and clear language he feels. People talk of rights and justice, he said, without even mentioning exploitation, oppression and deprivation.

One of our team members said: *"There is rights related activity but little understanding and articulation of power"*.

Therefore, in spite of a lot of talk of RBA and some really good rights based work, it is difficult to say AAI's work has led to any changes in power structures or tackled the causes of poverty at the local, national or global levels.

While the "poor" are indeed getting some services and income, there was little evidence to show that the causes of poverty are being addressed? Are there even detailed discussions and analysis of the causes of poverty? I found them missing. In some policy documents there is very good analysis by policy analysts. However, the language and style of most of these documents, makes them inaccessible to field level staff. At the local level there is description of poverty but little analysis of the economic and political structure and power relationships in the documents produced.

Much more work is required to study, analyze and understand the causes of poverty before they can be fought. Policy and advocacy and field level work seem to be moving in parallel lines, without much interaction.

Personally, I am neither surprised nor disappointed because I know how deeply entrenched systems creating poverty and exclusion are at all levels. I know structural changes are extremely difficult. Only long term, sustainable and strategic work by teams who have strong analytical, planning, conflict transformation skills and staying power, can change structures, and that too very slowly.

More than anything else, much more solid and creative human potential development work is required. AAI can hardly help partners to work on gender and rights if its own staff are not clear. And the staff are not clear because not much investment has been made to prepare them. Those who have brought sharp perspective, strong capabilities and commitment along, are doing good work. However, the lack of learning and sharing opportunities within AAI and between AAI and others doing innovative work, does not allow these sparks to create other sparks and become a proper fire.

A well respected partner of AAI said, other organizations think, plan and prepare before they launch campaigns. In AAI they start campaigns without any planning. According to him someone up there gets a good idea but people in the field do not know how to implement it. *"Some of these campaigns are also imposed on us"*.

A senior AAI HIV/AIDS person said, the rights based work in AAI had started off very well, but then it lost its vibrancy mainly because of lack of investment in staff.

Some people feel AAI is spreading itself too thin. It should identify a few areas/themes and develop capabilities and teams to, pursue them and make a dent.

These observations, questions and doubts, if taken seriously and answered, can help AAI consolidate its work and move forward.

3. Development of Human Potential Neglected in AAI

As pointed out by Shamim Meer in the AAI Gender review, the goal oriented organizational culture leaves little time for reflection and analysis. There is hardly any time for reading, building informed perspectives, keeping update with debates. There are few “inputs” for AA staff who are constantly required to produce outputs.

In AAI there seems to be more emphasis on “hard capacities” (accounts, IT management) than on “soft capacities” which have to do with practising and promoting values like rights, pluralism, gender, equality and empowerment.

AA Kenya has this very effective programme for building capacities in accountancy of AA internally and of its partners. There are eight capacity building accountants on the move all the time implementing the “Zero Tolerance to Corruption Policy”. There is a similar programme in India, with a big Internal Audit team. This almost foolproof model could be used to audit rights, gender equality etc. but this is not being done.

For AAI accountability seems to be mainly financial. Only financial audit seems to matter and given importance. There is little understanding of and investment into building accountability systems for the main values and principles, the main objectives. The values and principles (rights based approach, gender equality, building partnerships, advocacy) have been largely left at the level of policy statements. There is little evidence to show that serious efforts have been made in every country programme to develop HR/OD systems to implement these principles.

This shows that **means** (accounts, OD, management) **are being given more importance and resources than ends** i.e. empowerment of communities, gender equality, respect for rights, pluralism etc.

3.1 In Spite of ALPS Little Learning and Reflection on Basic Values and Concepts

The principle and conceptualisation of ALPS is excellent, but especially in the context of gender, one did not see much learning and reflection in practice. If clarity and expertise on gender is missing, how can gender be mainstreamed anyway? AAI cannot get outside expertise for everything and all the time.

Some of the team members who recently did the India Country Review made some very critical but perceptive statements on this issue. According to them major changes were made in the vision, mission and goals of the organization, but no help was provided to the staff to understand the new perspectives and to internalise the new values and practices. According to them in India, several new initiatives were started but no efforts have been made to evolve a common understanding on the process of impoverishment or gender subordination or on human rights. This, would be true also of other country programmes I visited.

They said they saw no work on prevention or on fighting the causes of poverty. Hence, according to them, AA India will keep dealing with relief and symptoms, because of the absence of work on understanding the causes of inequalities and dealing with inequalities.

Another member of the review team, who was previously an AAI Country Director, said with candour and extreme sadness *“we in AA are good at making visions and missions, but we don’t do nuts and bolts of capacity building, methodology development, strategising. Those who know and can swim do so. Some even excel. The others just go down”*.

She went on to say that *“no systematic help is provided to staff members to understand, accept and internalise the vision and related concepts. Some senior people in AAI give radical slogans in the FPT strategy paper and hope these slogans can stand alone, they will get implemented automatically. There is no investment in training on RBA or gender, even, or specially at the top level. **Investment on internalisation is seen as a luxury, not as a necessity**”*.

*“No attempt is made to help staff members understand concepts and involve them in planning and strategising. **Workshops are done to tell people what to do.**”*

“AA has done and is willing to do very little work inside, on people and their attitudes and behaviour. There is little attempt to change people and to reflect on processes.”

On gender this is what this committed, competent and loyal (to AAI) person had to say *“In AAI, gender is one step forward, ten steps backward. Because gender is not understood it backfires. Some people in AAI, for example, think Anti Sexual Harassment policy is meant to harass men and to nail them down.”* These are damaging statements by someone who knows AAI as the palm of her hand and the only motive for whose statements is genuine concern for AAI.

Similar comments were made by the International Gender Coordinator, the Policy Division Rights Advisor and a staff member working on HIV/AIDS. All of them feel strongly that there is no investment in staff to develop the understanding of people within AAI on these crucial issues and to integrate these concerns into other programmes: *“There is no push to make people understand”*. *“We need much more investment in training people on rights. And what is required is not conventional training but creatively done collective reflection leading to internalisation of concepts like rights, gender equity, partnership; concepts which require changes not only in thinking but also in attitudes, behaviour and relationships”*. Serious attention needs to be paid to this aspect of AAI’s work.

The result of this lack of ongoing investment in people, their potential and capacities is the indifferent performance on gender and rights in many programmes. The “flashes of brilliance” related to gender work shine so much because they are not shared across the organization. As pointed out in earlier reviews also, there is not much sharing on and learning from successful initiatives within the organization. There is even less sharing and learning between AAI and other development actors. Not enough cross fertilisation of ideas and this is a great loss.

AAI should realise that it was easy to get activities with/for women started. However, as is being reported by most people, many of these programmes and activities can hardly be called “gender” programme and activities. They are basically women’s activities, at best providing some income and services. They are not even discussing, leave aside challenging, gender relations. The challenges of the next level work demands improved analysis, clarity, expertise and commitment. And all these have to be shared and owned by most, if not all, people in the organization. This requires series of well designed and run learning and capacity building opportunities.

3.2 Human Development Needs to be at the Core of All Programmes

AAI has adopted FPT and a set of values to go along with it. For values and changes to be sustainable they have to be anchored in people (not just in policy papers). Once individuals internalise and practice these values they start influencing others around them, within their families communities and organizations. An important question for AAI is, in addition to a political declaration of these changes and values, how much has the organization done to see that these values are understood, accepted, shared, internalised and practiced by AAI staff and by AAI partners and their staff?

Value based development interventions need to have Human Development at its core. Only when human beings and their development is at the core, can and will value based development take roots and flourish. Along with human development, institutional development will also take place as human beings are the core of all institutions. Once the individuals in an organization practice values, the institution becomes value based. By promoting human development values and practices, organizations can move towards achieving their goals of removing poverty, promoting justice, equality, pluralism etc.

The most important task therefore for AAI is to help the staff to master necessary human/institutional development (HID) competencies. These are first related to attitudes, beliefs and values of individuals. Then there are social competencies which have to do with relating to others-communication, listening, affirming and empowering others. Methodological competencies are also required to promote change processes. These are competencies to analyze, undertake participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation, moderating skills, self evaluation etc. Rights and gender perspective has to be an integral part these. Without systematic and systemic HID work, it is difficult to achieve results and to institutionalise them. This is the area which deserves maximum attention and resources in AAI. The same kind of importance has to be given to the development of human potential in the programmes as is given to accounts and financial audit.

4. Reflective Responses to Some Reflective Questions

In our meetings with the International Directors and in some other meetings, several reflective questions were raised. I am not sure if those questions were addressed to the TS2 team. May be they were loud thoughts meant for the AAI team, to be discussed and resolved internally. Be as it may, but because those questions triggered some thoughts in my mind and heart I am writing them down and sharing them for whatever they are worth.

4.1 What is/Should be the Identity of AAI?

This question was raised more than once, in different contexts and in different ways. Is AAI, a donor or an activist NGO? Is it a Northern or a Southern NGO? Does it itself take positions or helps others to take a position? Does/should AAI support movements or is it part of movements?

Like individuals, organizations do not have one, fixed identity. They can and do have **multiple identities** and at different times and in different situations, different

identities can become primary. Also **identities are often fluid**. Following are some of AAI's identities.

Post internationalisation, **AAI is both a Northern and a Southern organization**. In addition, it is an **international organization**.

In countries and situations where AAI raises funds, **it's a donee or a recipient of funds** hence vis-à-vis some bilateral organizations, corporate houses, governments and the public from whom AAI receives funds it is a donee or a recipient. Where it provides funds it is a **donor**.

The nature of AAI's activities, hence its **identity, is also influenced by external factors**, In a country with little democratic space AAI is forced to take on a different persona i.e. low key, not loudly activist etc. In other countries where democratic spaces are available it can play an activist role and take bold positions, e.g. in India during the massacres of Muslims in Gujarat.

At the community level, AAI takes on a **supportive role** rather than be the activist/actor itself. There it helps CBOs and NGOs to solve local issues related to basic services and rights etc. At the national and international level AAI **can take strong positions** on its own or as a partner of alliances. It can itself be a **strong advocate**.

Different units within AAI also give AAI different identities, like that of a **researcher, advocate, net worker, builder of capacities etc.**

Sometimes individuals within AAI have/ or develop strong identities and profiles of their own. These can also colour the identity of AAI. For example if someone strong and well known from the women's movement joins AA, AA develops a feminist persona. Similarly a well known human rights activist, or a well known researcher gives AA another persona. In India, Harsh Mander's writings on Gujarat gave AA India the identity of an activist.

Similarly in some situations AAI may be a **partner of governments or the World Bank**. In other situations it may be a **strong critic** of their perspectives and policies.

During emergencies, AAI may be mainly a **provider of relief and basic services**. Vis-à-vis the most vulnerable groups also it may focus on providing services. In other situations it may work for **structural change**.

In some countries and situations AAI's identity is that of **direct implementer of projects**. In other places it **works through partners**.

Vis-à-vis new and inexperienced partners AAI may take on the role of a **teacher/advisor guide**. Vis-à-vis some other partners who have more clarity and experience, it may be a **junior partner in the learning/following mode**.

These **multiple identities may also be in conflict** with each other. e.g. being a foreign donor and an activist may not always work. In such situations AAI has to make strategic choices.

Different people in AAI may be comfortable with some identities and not so comfortable with others. One example is the discomfort amongst some staff members with the feminist positions of some colleagues, or radical positions of some.

It is important to recognise and appreciate these multiple and fluid identities and also learn to deal with them sensitively.

4.2 Is AAI Supporter of Movements or Part of Movements?

This was another question raised several times and in different way during the TS2.

To answer this question we first have to agree what a movement is. A broad definition I have been quite happy with is, **a movement is a whole spectrum of conscious and unconscious, individual or collective acts, activities groups or organizations concerned with any issue i.e. gender, caste, class, ethnicity, race, environment.**

Movements are not static. They have to be seen as processes which are modified as they come in contact with everyday life and realities, confronting power hierarchies. There is a constant process of reflection communication , negotiation.

Sections within the same movement may disagree with each other on causes, strategies, alliances etc. Movements may or may not have cohesiveness, a central organization, a vanguard leadership etc.

Different people /organizations can be located at different points and perform different roles, in a movement, e.g. some may act at the local level, others at the global; some may do research, others may do street action.

In the case of the Narmada movement, for example, all those people and organizations who support the cause at any level, in any way are part of the movement , i.e. local people, outsiders like Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, researchers, lawyers, journalists, sympathetic politicians and government servants, fund contributors, citizens of Germany, Japan, US etc. who lobbied in their countries against funding for the dam. They are all part of the Narmada Bachao Movement and not only those who are involved in direct action at the local level.

Based on this understanding of a movement and looking at AAI's vision, mission and objectives, one has to say that AAI, is indeed, part of many movements globally, movements for human rights, economic, social and cultural rights, gender equality, peace, ecology, secularism etc.

AAI plays different roles in these movements at different locations and times.

Actually, AAI's vision, mission, goals may themselves be influenced or be the products of movements. A strong human rights movement, for example, influences us and we come up with fresh visions, missions, and objectives like in the FPT. There is dialectics. There is interdependence. Activists are created by movements and they in turn support and strengthen movements. Interdependence is perhaps the key word. "I AM BECAUSE YOU ARE", said the sages ages ago.

4.2.1 Movements and Their Ownership

Ownership or projection of identities is a problem in movements. AAI has had a share of these problems. To project or not to project, what to project, whom to project are troubling questions. There have been complaints of AAI projecting itself, rather than

the cause/movement. Several people have commented that AA India was “stealing publicity in Gujarat” or “thematic networks (e.g. on education in Kenya) are projected and known as AAI networks”. People said “it is money which speaks”. A very senior and responsible person from within AA said: *“In the education campaign AA got much more visibility than civil society organisation (CSOs) who have been working on right to education for decades”*.

Similar complaints are heard about many organizations. To be successful and strong, movements require, egoless/nameless participation by their constituents. To have a larger and stronger identity of a movement, we must submerge our smaller, individual identities. Rivers have to shed their personal names/identities when they join the ocean. When in the ocean, even tiny drops of water are known as the ocean. No water body carries its nameplate or banner when it joins the ocean.

Human beings and organizations however, seem to have bigger egos than rivers and rivulets. Instead of merging with the movement they want the movement to take on their name. These ego hassles sometimes necessitated by funding/reporting requirements, have led to splintering of many movements/networks/alliances. Ongoing reflection is required on these issues, which have to do with power and control. Issues of power and control cannot be sorted out once and for all. They are ongoing issues and require constant attention and vigilance.

4.3 Should AAI’s Focus be on Changes Inside the Organization or Outside?

To explain it is not a question of either/or, Chairman Mao often said “we must walk on both legs”. To the above question I copy Chairman Mao and say, it’s not a question of either/or. One has to walk on both legs to move faster towards our goals. However, since it is the insiders who have to help/work with the outsiders to change, it is more important to start with changes within the organization. Organizations have the legitimacy and experience to change others only after they have successfully tried out the same changes inside. Also people learn more by **seeing** changes than by **hearing** or **reading** lectures about them. Therefore, AAI has to start becoming a gender sensitive organization if it wants its partners to practice and promote gender equality; it must REFLECT inside, if it wants others to REFLECT. It must ALPS well itself if it wants others to ALPS. Putting these principles into practice makes us aware of the hurdles and difficulties and makes us humble. It creates partnerships in practice.

4.4. Should Organizations Focus on Changing Individuals or Institutionalising Change?

The duality contained in this question again seems false to me. Once again we have to remember walking on both legs is better.

The importance of people cannot be overstated, as is clear from this story, a big favourite with me. An adivasi (indigenous) leader was asked what according to her were the three most important things in life. She thought for a while and said: *“The first most important thing in life is people”*. After some more reflection she said *“The second most important thing in life is people”*. “The third most important thing, she said was the same – *“PEOPLE”*.

Whether we like it or not, people play a big role in shaping organizations, Committed, strong, skilled, strong willed people do wonders to an organization. To its credit, AAI has attracted many such people to its fold. They have created sparks of brilliance. The success stories created by these individuals are the ones normally quoted in reports. It is their work which appears in prominently placed boxes. These sparks of brilliance seem to be surrounded by dull, average or sometimes even below average ideas, projects , performances.

It is also to the credit of AAI that it allows the exceptional people it attracts into its fold, to innovate and experiment. AAI provides enough flexibility and also a great deal of power to its Country Directors and DI/DA managers to do what they want. This of course can and does sometimes also lead to resentment and problems. AAI senior staff members themselves have said Country Directors are laws unto themselves. *“CPs and DI/DAs are fiefdoms”, “CDs may or may not follow all the AAI objectives. They may put resources and energies into their hobby horses and totally ignore some international campaigns.”* Examples were given to back these statements. Several senior people in some country programmes are said to have left the organization in protest against such arbitrariness.

To some extent these problems are unavoidable especially if you put a premium on brilliance, innovation, flexibility. Mechanisms can however be developed to minimise these problems. Changes can and should be institutionalised. Organizational agendas need to be owned by everyone in the organization and not just by one, two, or a few people. In the absence of institutionalising change, good programmes can disappear as fast as they appeared, if some crucial people leave. And this has happened quite often in AAI. Institutionalizing change requires taking people along, building close partnerships between different sections, building HR/OD capabilities and systems.

4.5 Any Contradictions Between Being a Multinational NGO Corporation (MNgoC) and FPT?

By deciding and declaring to the world that it wants to fight poverty and fight causes of poverty, not just its symptoms and also fight gender inequalities, AAI has created huge challenges for itself. It is so much easier and uncomplicated to just deliver services. You don't have to disturb power structures within communities and countries and between them. You don't have to take on huge and deeply entrenched economic, political and cultural systems of power, which created and continue to recreate impoverishment and hierarchies of all kinds-class, caste, race, gender, North South etc.

Another huge challenge AAI created for itself is by deciding and declaring that it will now work with partners and do advocacy. Simply said, advocacy means AAI will try to influence and change others; take them along to change the most deep-rooted systems of class, caste, race, patriarchy, North/South. (This is what FPT means!) And the trouble is, we cannot and should not, influence others without putting our own self and our own house in order. To take an example: can AAI or does it have the moral right, to advocate gender equality, for example, if women are missing at top levels, if commitment to gender equality is missing at top level, if the turn over of women staff is high within and if the few women and men committed to gender equality shake their head in sadness and desperation while answering the question, “how much has really changed inside”? I would imagine the answer is no.

Ambitious visions and policy statements challenge us deeply. The good thing however is that these challenges are self-imposed. They emanate from our desire and commitment to justice, equality, pluralism and other human values. They emanate from our desire to constantly improve and rise. These high visions are there to humanize us, to make us proud of ourselves. This is what is positive, BUT it is very challenging, even disturbing.

For me personally, goals like FPT and gender equality create too many contradictions and uncomfortable questions e.g. can people (like you and me) in positions of power within AAI ACTUALLY fight poverty when we ourselves are from the powerful segments of class, caste, race, gender, and North-South power hierarchies Can we do it without transforming ourselves, our life styles, consumption patterns etc?

My own personal experience says that many of us in positions of power in organizations like AAI, do transform ourselves but in the wrong direction. Because of the pretty high salaries and perks, we go higher in class hierarchy; our lifestyles become more consumerist; we liberate ourselves from economic hardships; we move into posh offices and move in powerful vehicles, have ACs and PCs and drivers and guards . If not our beliefs, our life styles become a hindrance to FPT (study the lives of social activists who join well funded organizations like AAI and see the transformation). I know, to be efficient we need high salaries, air-conditioned offices and cars; to get the right people we have to pay market prices (e.g. my daily fee to do the review!!) so we pay much higher salaries to some than to others. We create grades. We end up creating exactly those caste, class, race, and gender hierarchies inside the organization, which we want to fight in the outside world.

AND to do better and more work and to make policy changes we start taking money from and/or start working in partnership with DFID, WB, USAID and MNCs, all organizations responsible (in the eyes of many) for perpetuating poverty and class, race, North-South hierarchies.

To be competitive in the “free market” of development, we start bidding for contracts; development contracts!! (This sounds like heresy to the ears of old timers like me!!) We also start raising funds locally. Suddenly all our allies and partners (with whom we should be FPTing) become competitors. From now on we can't share our strategies and plans with them because we have to compete with them. Now we have to claim we are better than our allies and partners.

A good look at the NGO sector today shows that those who should be closest of partners and working together are often competitors, even enemies. By offering higher salaries and perks NGOs are stealing “human resources” from each other. When humans become resources, you can do with them what you like. You can do headhunting (sounds awfully violent to me). They are not comrades, team-mates or partners. They are resources in a market driven world. NGOs start following the unethical rules of the free market, which they deride in their policy papers.

Our work styles and working hours perpetuate gender division of labour and make it impossible for NGO workers to combine work and family life. Inside every committed employee of an MNGoC who is in the office deep into the evening and the night and on holidays, is a neglectful, even oppressive family person. The family waits, slogs, struggles while s/he FPTs and works for gender equality. Gender balance in their own lives and families sacrificed for FPT?

In addition, our work cultures can and often do turn women into “men”!! Women have to start behaving like men or else we are made to feel guilty. (Gosh, these women!! They want their rights but want to leave for home at the dot of 5!!) A senior women in AAUK told me earnestly that women with children had no business to take on senior positions. They have to choose. They can’t have everything. She said no such thing about men with children. To be successful within an organization women have to become “masculine” in their thoughts and behaviour. If they don’t become “masculine” they cannot make it in the power hierarchy, but when they do become masculine they are “no good anymore as women”.

MNGoC perforce develop a corporate language, management style, office culture etc. It has taken me a long time to understand that fund raising is called Marketing and ideas to get new donors/partners for FPT are now “products”. Child sponsorships, Azione Donna, Next Steps are all products. People who are moved by the miserable lives of poor children and share their earnings are now consumers. Ad Agencies are hired to package products to hook consumers. The packaging has to be “cutting edge” since the competition (with other MNGoCs) is tough.

How does/can this thinking and language match the FPT language and thinking of “North/South partnership,” “understanding the root causes of poverty”, “challenging structures of power” ? Is it possible to sell revolution (taken to its logical end, FPT is revolutionary) through advertising and PR firms to people with surplus cash, made possible by colonialism and neo imperialism? Isn’t all this a bit confusing? For me it is.

Power makes us all look the same!! Look at corporate leaders of different races, nationalities, religions, and sexes. They all look the same because they wear the same clothes, use the same ACs, PCs, cars, pens, briefcases, perfumes, shoes, sunglasses and they all use the same language- management and market language.

FPT and gender equality are in the final analysis about dismantling power structures. But our organizations themselves become structures of power, they develop (and hence they perpetuate) class, caste, race, gender, North-South, we-other, hierarchies inside the organizations. During the last thirty years of funded and professionalized development work, the hierarchies and disparities within development organizations have worsened manifold. And once we start living in a glasshouse ourselves, can we really question/attack other glasshouses?

In my personal life I have been guilty of too many compromises in my lifestyle. But in my mind I am absolutely clear which people and organizations have made a bigger political impact-those in whose life there is a wide gap between precept and practice or those who constantly try to bridge this gap?

May be my doubts/reflections are outdated in today’s world!! Since these doubts re-emerged during my visits to AAI, sharing them is not out of place, is it?

Notes from the Country Visits

1. Some Reflections on the Visit to ActionAid UK

Most of the people I met in Hamlyn House, be they from AAUK or AAI, hold AAI in high esteem and that is why they said, they are working with AAI. What most staff members admire AAI for or what attracted them to AA is, its philosophy of development, its non denominational nature, its diversity, its relative openness and the opportunity it provides for innovation.

Because they like their work and feel respected, the level of commitment amongst the staff is high. The sense I got by looking at AAUK products is that the staff is also very skilled and hardworking.

AAUK's work with schools and with young people is very innovative and inspiring. It is involving thousands of young people across the country in thinking about and taking action on issues related to justice, ecological sustainability, HIV/AIDS rights like, food rights, trade, debt, GM foods. Big public events like the Reading Music Festival are being used by young volunteers to share information on the above issues and get people involved in a dialogue and action.

The media and communication team of AAUK is also doing commendable work of keeping development issues in the public domain. I was particularly impressed by the "Women and War" exhibition.

My brief interaction with Facilities Management Team gave me the impression that they also feel proud of their contribution to the smooth functioning of the office, without which AAUK and AAI could not FPT.

Many AAUK teams have been facing and coping with huge challenges and changes. This is particularly true of the Marketing team. The entire perspective and thrust of AAI changed when it adopted FPT. This had huge implications for the fund raising team. It required fundamental changes in the approach to donors and to the sponsorship work. AAI took the plunge. The staff had to rise up to it and make it work. It was a huge risk. I was told about 50 staff members from the marketing team had to leave the organization because of these changes. Many new people have joined. The team is trying to move child sponsorship to Next Steps, which focuses on development of communities rather than of individual children.

The team is slowly but definitely trying to incorporate the FPT philosophy in all its work and in everything, they produce. They have managed to take along many child sponsors towards FPT. A big proportion has made the move from child sponsorship to the Next Steps. Hardly any child sponsors have dropped out because of the changed ideology of AAI. This means almost 160000 people and their families in the North are slowly making a shift in their understanding of poverty and hopefully also in the nature of their partnership with the marginalized communities in the South. Large numbers have participated in some of the AAI campaigns like FRC, AIDS by sending postcards to decision makers, writing to them etc. This is a very positive step towards building partnerships and strengthening the movement against the causes of poverty.

A team of 54 AAUK people raised pounds 37 million last year. This is a great achievement and is the foundation on which most of the Country Programmes stand.

I got a sense that some members of the Marketing Team feel that AAI does not quite appreciate the achievements of the team in the face of huge challenges. They feel some colleagues look down upon child sponsorship and the Marketing team is not given adequate respect and space in decision making fora. The example quoted was that no one from the team has been involved in the planning of the next conference in Bangkok.

One senior person felt that the non-recognition of the fund raising team might be because the Head is a woman. No one will ignore a man head, she said. If this is at all true then it is a very sad reflection on gender relations within AAUK.

The fund raising work done by the UK team needs to be recognized and appreciated not just by AA UK but also now by all AAI constituents who receive these funds for their work.

It also needs to be recognized that this money raised from the public is not tied, it is more or less ensured, it does not require the time of very senior people on writing cumbersome project proposals to get (tied) funds from donors, and spending a lot of their time at HQs in various capital cities. The most positive aspect is that it involves the public in development issues. (These comments also echo the thoughts of an AAUK Trustee).

2. Spirit of Volunteerism in Italy

Marco Cristian, a young Italian business consultant spoke with satisfaction and pride about his involvement as a volunteer with AAItaly. Although an interpreter was present, Marco and I managed to communicate directly in simple English. Soon after he got the job, Marco started sponsoring Amina, a girl in Bangladesh. This was his way of sharing his good luck and resources, he said. He pays Euros 276 per year. He knows and is happy that his contribution is helping Amina's community and not just Amina.

Two years ago, Marco became a volunteer with AA Italy and organised the first local group in Milan, with 30 members. "Our work is intense and passionate. We keep talking to people in our offices, in restaurants and bars about AA Italy. We organise charity shows. These days we are working with a local theatre group to raise money for a school in Ethiopia".

"We are interested in global solidarity. We cannot enjoy our life without being of help to others".

In October 2003, Marco and his friends organised a concert by women musicians in a small church. They raised Euros 300 in one evening. This money was for work against HIV Aids in Kenya. Marco likes the new approach of AA Italy to form local groups *"because this helps us become activists and not just donors. Now we get educated on issues and then talk to others. This is better than simple messages of child sponsorship. It is definitely more difficult but also more satisfying."*

Marco was visibly excited. There was a sense of satisfaction and excitement in his voice.

BUT, Marco supports the war against Iraq. I was surprised to hear this. Who said life was simple?

2.1 Innovative Ideas for Fund and Awareness Raising in AA Italy

I was very impressed by the following innovative ideas, evolved by AA Italy to raise funds and awareness on development issues.

AA Italy is asking people not to distribute confectionary at weddings and confirmations and to donate the money saved to AA International. They provide samples of well designed invitation cards, which explain why confectionary is not being distributed and what the money will be used for, instead.

Partnership with GS, a Chain of supermarkets, asks buyers to donate their accumulated points to sponsor a child. Information on this is included in all the brochures of GS on what the accumulated points may be used for.

In a partnership with a chain of restaurants, the clients are asked to donate to AAI. For every five cents, a client gives the restaurant gives 10.

A very innovative and educative partnership has been developed between Action Aid Italy and Wella, a company producing products for hair. Two days in November 1000 hairdressers across Italy donate the money they earn from their clients to AA Italy. The Campaign is called "Give a Day for Life". Well produced publicity materials explaining the campaign and the work of Action Aid Italy are distributed. Wella and the hairdressers participate in this campaign to underline the social role of hairdressers. "For us it is a mission to say that we can also do something for other people" said Ms.Giovanna Usvardi of Wella, in a telephonic interview with me. They use the slogan "Beauty comes from the heart". In 2004, this campaign raised 150000 Euros plus a lot of awareness on development issues.

Famous Rock stars like Bono from Ireland and well known actors have partnered with Action Aid Italy to raise awareness on and funds for HIV/AIDS work.

AA Italy is also creating and using nice slogans for raising awareness on issues.

- Let Us Spread Rights
- Let Us Stop HIV/AIDS
- Food is a Right for Every Day
- Together for a More Responsible Business

3. The President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Honours AA Vietnam

In 2004, 11 international NGOs and 11 individuals were given the order of friendship award by the president of Vietnam. This award was in recognition of excellent work done in Vietnam by these INGOs and individuals. AAI and AA Vietnam can rightly be proud of this rare honour.

AA Vietnam and AAI can also be proud of the high reputation AA Vietnam enjoys with government people at all levels. A very bright, articulate and powerful young

leader in a senior position in the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (which coordinates the work of INGOs) and Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation, sang praises of AA Vietnam's sensitivity, commitment, work strategies and methodologies.

The reasons for his appreciation of AAV, he said, were the following:

The objectives of the AAV are very relevant to Vietnam. Like AAI, Vietnam government is also working for equality, justice, sustainability. We want the market to work for the people. The policy and advocacy work being done by AAV is essential for poor people and poor countries.

Eva's work in the field is very effective. Rural communities have benefited greatly and they appreciate the long term solutions of poverty being tried out. There is no charity. It is building of capacities and developing methodologies. To liberate and enhance people's capacities is important and AAV is doing this.

The benefits of AAV activities are not limited to the beneficiaries. They have nationwide impact on awareness of people and on national policies. We value AAV's views on development issues.

AAV's approach is very good and constructive. They do not impose. They work at the level of people. They come as friends and not as teachers. They are true partners. **In Eastern culture, the way you bring these things is as important as what you bring.** AAV staff are committed, competent and sensitive. They work in a creative way. They are open to new ideas and willing to help. For example, when AAV heard our government was keen to participate in the WSF in Mumbai, they helped us get there. They even helped us prepare our interventions. The Vietnam delegation to WSF was led by Madam Binh, a well known freedom fighter, an earlier Vice President of the country and presently the Chairperson of VUFO and Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation.

Mr. Bui Duc Hank, the Vice Chairman of Ha Tinh District People's Committee, was a teacher. He is a very sensitive and knowledgeable person. When I told him, coming to Vietnam was like a pilgrimage for me and Chairman Ho Chi Minh was/is also our hero, he said he and many young people like him were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru. He said even in the present days, India is an inspiration to us in our work to achieve food sufficiency. In our heart India is a big friend, he said, keeping his hand firmly on his heart.

After this brief mutual admiration session, I asked him if and why he valued the work of AAV. His answer was spontaneous, flowing and once again deeply appreciative of AA Vietnam. These are the points he made:

AAV started working here in 1995. We consider their work to be highly successful. AAV is a companion of the District people in eradicating hunger and poverty.

We were confused and lacked experience for this work. AAV showed us the way. AAVs approach and work is a crystallisation of experiences and ideas from different parts of the world.

AAV has offered us useful methodologies to tackle poverty.

The funds provided by AAV are small but they are spent well and strategically. So the impact is good. We value their approach, the systems developed, for example the system to provide credit to the poor.

Another major contribution of AAV is the training it has provided to the government staff and to the people in the community.

AAV is phasing out, but we are sure the work will continue and grow because it has taken roots. The methodologies and systems learnt have become part of our functioning. They will be used and replicated by us.

We are happy that before leaving this area AAV has helped us create a Centre for Community Development, an NGO. This centre can carry the work forward. We from the government will provide full support to the Centre.

Such sentiments about AAV were expressed by government people and other partners in other countries we visited. We also join these people and say WELL DONE AA Vietnam and Action Aid International.