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RE SEARCH

**A NEW SPINOUT FROM
NUI MAYNOOTH STANDS
TO CREATE A BUZZ IN THE
BEE INDUSTRY WHICH HAS
SUFFERED DEVASTATING
DECLINES IN RECENT YEARS**



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DOES CHARITY WOUND?

Russia went from being a donor of international aid to a recipient, and is now fighting its way back across the floor. Dr Patty Gray is studying the discourse of charity through the experience of the former superpower.

Irish people were shocked to learn that the Red Cross was intervening to help flood victims in the south and west of the country last year. Notwithstanding an inward flow of EU structural funds over decades, Ireland has not regarded itself as needy in a long time. A country's position on the spectrum from donor to aid recipient plays a very important role in its projected image. Dr Patty Gray of the Department of Anthropology in NUI Maynooth has been studying the global aid dynamic, and the unintended consequences of state-sponsored humanitarianism. She is examining discourses of aid through the optic of Russia, a nation that has been both donor and recipient, and has recently re-entered the international 'donor's club'.

'I took an interest in this area through my research in the remote Russian region of Chukotka, across the Bering Sea from Alaska,' she explains. 'There was severe poverty in the region and Alaskan donors were keen to fix everything. Through the US Agency for International Development, money was channelled into the region and quality of life there did improve for some. However there were unintended consequences in terms of culture and power relations in the area.' Dr Gray describes how the old system of reindeer farming, for example, collapsed under the privatisation programme masterminded by American economists, leaving many local people without a means of income or a way of life.

The Chutkotka case got Gray thinking about the way we think of aid to 'developing regions', and how our actions and discourses around the subject impact on those involved. At this time, Russia was emerging as an international donor, and Gray decided to examine the attitudes and language surrounding this very profound strategic shift. 'Russia has been globally perceived as a recipient for a long time. I am interested in studying the perceptions around this change. There is so much critique of how developed countries help underdeveloped countries, but what happens when a country that had been a recipient becomes a donor?'

Gray points to two main motivations for development aid. 'There is the strategic line of thinking; if the developing world is unstable, then it can cause insecurity for the developed world. Then there is the charitable impulse; people say, 'don't you see the suffering? Don't you want to help?'' The second impulse may seem more virtuous, says Gray, but it can be flawed as well.

Marcel Mauss, in his seminal work 'The Gift', coined the phrase 'charity wounds'. His thesis is that communities thrive on reciprocal relations and interdependence.

Gifts exchanged between small primitive societies, he argued, carry obligations. The meeting of those obligations strengthens ties between communities, he says.

If one party is constantly in the subject position, says Mauss, it demeans that party, forcing them to see themselves in a certain way. Gray wondered how this interpretation of giving pertains in a global context. How is the discourse around Africa informed by its perennial patronisation?

A further aspect of the subject intrigued Gray. 'Those in the club of donors – the US and western Europe for example – have an idea about how aid should be directed and what it should achieve. What happens when former developing nations get involved in aid and bring their own ideas of how it should be directed? Will they be allowed into the club, or will the former members feel threatened?'

The notion of Brazil, Russia, India and China (known in this context as the BRIC nations) getting involved in international aid has caused unease among traditional donors, says Gray. Aid distributed under the auspices of organisations such as the OECD and the DAC (Development Assistance Committee) is regarded as accountable, rule-bound and transparent, she explains. 'There's a fear that the developing nations may not observe these conventions'. At the most extreme end of this unease lie groups like Freedom House in the US, who regard the entry of developing nations into the aid network as a potential threat to democracy. There's such a thing as bad giving, it seems. 'There has been a flurry of discourse in the media about the notion of the BRIC nations getting involved', says Gray. 'Already it's coming to be known as 'reverse aid' rather than just plain aid. That tells you something about the assumptions being made.'

As it happens, Russia is playing by the rules. In 2006, says Gray, the Russian government announced plans to develop the technical apparatus to donate. At the same time the British development aid programme to Russia was wound down. That same agency is now assisting Russia in developing the accounting, budgetary and infrastructural systems required to donate like those in the 'donors' club.' The authorities have created a research institute and have even invented new terminology in Russian to match the glossary of aid elsewhere, says Gray. 'They are signalling their intention to play the game.'

That's the discourse at the top, but what's happening on the ground in Russia? 'Ordinary Russians don't know about this, even though there are some very professional NGOs at work in Russia already, says Gray. Her research assistant in St. Petersburg, Tatiana Vagramenko, is gathering various discourse strands, from blogs to news clippings. 'A common response when Russian people hear about the move is 'Why? We have enough problems on the ground! The rightness or wrongness discussion is part of the discourse as well. The Russian authorities have to communicate this to their own citizens.'

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THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF GIVING FROM RUSSIA TO AFRICA

Throughout most of the 20th century the Soviet Union was one of the biggest aid donors in the world. During the Cold War a contest of competing visions meant that Soviet aid was regarded with suspicion by the west. The collapse of the Union led to two decades of inward development aid to Russia. It never sat easily with the Russian people, says Patty Gray, a social anthropologist who is studying the discourse around development aid in the context of modern Russia.

'Russians were pushed into a position of receiving aid from former opponents, in their new manifestation as a failed state,' says Gray, a US citizen who has done research in Northern Russia and is now a lecturer at NUI Maynooth.

'Russian families who received food packages in the 1990s would often say, 'We are not starving Africans! What does that tell us about the world's view of Africa and the unintended consequences of years of donation to that continent?'

The decision of Russia to return to donation is a self-conscious one, says Gray. 'Russia is becoming a donor to gain global respect. The interesting thing is that in their communications with their own public and the rest of the world, Russia emphasises its work in Africa, even though the greater part of its aid is going to countries closer to home, in Central Asia. Africa is still the byword for benevolence, whether it wants to be or not.'

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