

CANE SUGAR AND THE BRITISH VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

Jonathan Fryer,
Former Research and Information Officer, World Development
Movement

First, I should like to explain what an organisation like WDM does. Since the Second World War there have been a number of voluntary organisations in Europe which are financed principally by contributions from the public, and depend also upon voluntary help from the public, not only in their headquarters, but also in towns and villages throughout the country. We have 12 or 14 major organisations in Britain which are specifically working on development issues. Many were set up for relief purposes and still have an important role in emergency situations. But almost all have developed into organisations geared towards encouraging appropriate development, often rural development, in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

The WDM is slightly different because we don't have projects in developing countries. We work in this country to do two things. First, to educate the public about Third World Development, since the average person knows very little about everyday problems of developing countries. Moreover, the relationship of their lives and the historical, political and economic relationships between this country and the developing countries is for many a closed book. We try to get over that problem by publishing material and by lobbying to get the media interested.

Secondly, we try to pick off people in positions of power, sharing our perceptions with them and learning the problems of their everyday work. The Movement was founded in 1969 as a popular protest against the Government which was threatening to cut the amount of British overseas aid. We organised a petition to Downing Street and we hope it helped to get the Government to reverse its decision. But we have gone far beyond talking about the amount of aid, which is only a temporary paliative through which to advance to more healthy economic relationships. Trade, of course, is becoming more important and we are firmly behind the philosophy of the Brandt Report of an interdependent world. We work to stimulate development and two-way trade, because we firmly believe in its mutual benefit to Britain and to the developing countries.

We also have a very real moral concern for, and solidarity with, the developing countries, as do, I believe, many British people. Despite public lack of knowledge, there

is growing awareness through our own problems, that world recovery is needed. We hear hints that it is around the corner but I am afraid we don't share that optimism, unless there are fundamental changes in trading patterns, particularly in commodities, which are so important to your economies.

As regards sugar, when Britain was negotiating to join the EEC, several people realised that this could jeopardise our relationship with many Commonwealth countries. The WDM and others lobbied extensively to ensure that Britain stood up for the rights of sugar producing developing countries through a reasonable sugar protocol attached to the Lomé Convention. But we are well aware of the complicated issues involved. We are not only talking about changes in British policy and EEC policy. We are also talking about diversification in sugar producing countries. We have been trying to present these complex issues to the public and to our elected representatives.

I realise that lobbying elected representatives is not appropriate in all societies. But it works quite well in Britain and the EEC. I am constantly amazed how open are many of the people we have to see. I would particularly stress this as concerns Brussels. Many people in Britain are cynical and ignorant about the EEC. They don't realise how open the EEC, particularly the Commission, has been with non-governmental organisations such as WDM and our European colleagues. We have sister organisations in the different European countries and the world. We are linked through ICDA - the International Coalition for Development Action - of which WDM is the British member. ICDA has been much concerned with UNCTAD and at the Belgrade UNCTAD conference in June NGOs will be constantly lobbying, producing a newspaper containing various views and trying to bridge differences between confronting parties.

The Commonwealth Secretariat recently commissioned an important study on the quality and style of North-South negotiations and I was glad that the second Brandt Report in February echoed some of its sentiments and recommendations. It recognised the severe confrontations which unfortunately exist between Governments and forces in world economics. North/South negotiations are often parallel monologues of two sets of people who have already decided their positions. I would not claim that NGOs can transform the style and quality of negotiations, but I do believe that they provide an important channel of communications between confronting parties. At UNCTAD and other UN conferences where NGOs have been present, negotiators from different countries have found it extremely useful to be able to sound out ideas through them. I would therefore urge the use of NGOs. They do not exist to challenge the authorities, but to complement them, to give new perspectives and to provide channels for new ideas which would not normally be debated.

NGOs including the WDM will be particularly involved over the next 2 years with the re-negotiation of the Lomé Convention. We here will be producing briefings aimed at the public and therefore not in very technical language. We shall also be in contact with the ACP Secretariat in Brussels and the Commission. We will produce memoranda to the British Government and hope it will use the negotiations to ensure that Lomé's successor will be an improvement. We shall be pushing the EEC to join the International Sugar Agreement. But I would like to reiterate my plea to avoid aggression. Having worked in daily contact with the EEC in Brussels for about 7 years I realise how many people there are thinking constructively how to limit surplus beet production without damaging farmers' interests.

Recently I had an interesting encounter with senior officials from the National Farmers Union, the sort of contact which is particularly helpful for NGOs. Knowing they represented an interest in almost direct conflict with interests here I was impressed with their willingness to accept change. I think this is also true in Europe. I hope that over the next 2 years when the Sugar Agreement, Lomé, UNCTAD and all the international arrangements which we hope will launch us on the road to world recovery, are being discussed, NGOs and other consultative bodies will be brought in.

When I suggest to British politicians that on sugar we still have responsibility to ensure access to markets and to assist in appropriate diversification, the usual initial reaction is 'I can see why that's right, but the electorate wouldn't stand for it'. When we asked for more or better aid, we were told, because of unemployment and recession, this is not the main interest of the public.

The challenge for NGOs and for all us here is that for real dialogue and progress in world trade we have to convince not only Britain but people all around the world of the realities of interdependence. I hope governments, press, NGOs and special interest groups in different agricultural fields including sugar will recognise the tremendous potential to work together. It is exciting that a meeting such as this should come together to share experiences, acknowledge real problems and work out solutions which will mean a fair share for the poorest.

When looking at world sugar problems, we tend to be despondent because of their size. But I believe we should be looking for signs of hope, made possible by our working together.