

The Struggle for Alternatives: NGOs’ Responses to the *World Development Report 2008*

MATTEO RIZZO

This paper analyzes the response by NGOs to the 2008 World Development Report (WDR08). It does so at two levels of analysis, which in turn reflect two possible ways of reading the WDR08. The first is to read the WDR08 as a document for policy guidance on ‘agriculture for development’. In this respect the paper shows how NGOs expose and challenge the WDR08’s optimism for the benign impact of unregulated agribusiness investment on poverty reduction, and put forward a convincing alternative. The second, and politically more fertile, way of reading the WDR08 is to make sense of its numerous internal contradictions. These contradictions are functional to the World Bank’s hegemonic effort of establishing a common, and broader, agenda for rural development. Having highlighted the WDR08’s incoherent messages on (i) rural labour markets and their role in poverty reduction and (ii) what constitutes the most promising driver of poverty reduction in agriculture (returns from wage labour vs from own account farming), the paper documents NGOs’ failure to detect and politically exploit these contradictions.

Keywords: World Development Report 2008, NGOs, rural labour markets, agriculture, hegemony, ActionAid, Oxfam

INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews and critically assesses ‘the NGO response’ to the World Development Report 2008 (World Bank 2007; *WDR08* hereafter). The vast majority of NGOs have chosen not to respond to the *WDR08*, a choice that for some can be interpreted as a sign of their lack of faith in policy engagement with the World Bank, and for others of their increased adherence to the World Bank’s vision of development, and of the role that they play in realizing it as recipients of the Bank’s funds. Of the minority that have chosen to respond, a handful of organizations (Oxfam, ActionAid, the Dutch Members of the European

Matteo Rizzo, African Studies Centre, and St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. Correspondence to: African Studies Centre, 92 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 7ND, UK. e-mail: matteo.rizzo@africa.ox.ac.uk

The author would like to thank the editors and two reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Platform for Food Sovereignty, Misereor & Heinrich Boell Foundation) have opted for a written response to the *WDR08*, in the form of a briefing or a larger publication. Other NGOs, such as Save the Children and Concern, have commented orally.¹ Together these constitute the response by ‘civil society’ to the *WDR08*, the strength of which is under scrutiny in this paper.

There are several ways in which one can assess the strength of the NGO critique of *WDR08*. The method of assessment rests on the understanding one has of the role played by the *WDR08* in the economy of the World Bank’s (ever expanding) areas of competence.² Two main possible interpretations present themselves. As the Bretton Woods Project put it, in the aftermath of the release of the *WDR08*, ‘Donors, researchers and civil society groups anticipate that the document will play a central role in determining the direction of the Bank’s “return” to agriculture’ (2007, 1). If that is the case, the *WDR08* can be seen as the first step in a process of policy guidance on ‘agriculture for development’. The strength of the NGOs’ response can then be assessed by looking at their capacity to show the limitations of the *WDR08*’s analysis of problems with agricultural and rural development, and of the policy remedies the *WDR08* suggests, and by then exploring their ability to feed this critique into the formulation of an alternative policy framework. This paper partly does this, by exploring NGOs’ critiques of one amongst the thousand and one themes of the *WDR08*: the role of agribusiness in poverty reduction.

Whilst important, this would be an incomplete way of assessing the NGOs’ response as the *WDR08*, like its predecessors and any other flagship publication by the Bank, has no direct policy implications. What are they there for then? A number of scholars have usefully stressed their ideological significance, suggesting that such documents cannot be read as operational guidance to staff, but rather as ‘the World Bank’s signals of public relations and intentions’ (Moore 2007, 228), as attempts to ‘establish a particular view of the crisis [and its solutions] as hegemonic, as definitive of “the highest common ground”’ (Bernstein 1990, 16), on a specific development problem/issue.³ Wade’s study on *The East Asian Miracle*, and of the coexistence within it of both an orthodox and a pro-industrial policy reading of East and South-Asian growth, has strongly demonstrated the way in which analytical inconsistencies are functional to the goal of establishing a common, and broader, ground.

The inconsistencies should not be seen simply as ‘mistakes’. The authors might have left them in . . . an attempt to *widen* the grounds of debate

¹ Some of the NGOs’ oral responses to *WDR08* were presented at the ‘WDR 2008 workshop’ held at the Overseas Development Institute on 20 November 2007, as part of the activities of the ‘Future Agricultures Consortium’ sponsored by DFID. At the workshop NGO staff and academics posed questions to *WDR08*’s authors. Minutes from the workshop can be accessed at <http://www.odi.org.uk/plug/resources/reports/07-wdrworkshop-meeting-notes.pdf>

² For a critical overview of the changing role played by the World Bank in development see Pincus and Winters (2002).

³ Bernstein borrows the expression ‘highest common ground’ from the Bank who proclaimed, with its 1989 *Sub-Saharan Africa from Crisis to Sustainable Growth: A Longer-Term Perspective*, that ‘the aim must be to seek the highest common ground for joint action’ (World Bank 1989, 14).

without generating a backlash that would cause the report to be dismissed as incompetent or ideological, and the Bank to be accused of changing its mind. (Wade 2007, 303)

And when the ground broadens, as new issues are incorporated, the room for calling for change at the Bank increases. In Wade's words,

The pro-industrial policy statements, though at odds with the rest of the report, may function as attractor points by enabling those wishing to put new questions on the agenda to claim legitimacy from the Miracle study. This, it could be argued is the most likely way that big organizations change their minds; sharp changes are rare. (2007, 303)

Wade's reasoning on the link between the Bank's analytical inconsistency and the room for, and weight of, lobbying on the Bank, can be applied to any World Bank report. Thus, the second part of this paper critically assesses the capacity of NGOs to detect – and subsequently develop into a challenge to the Bank – internal contradictions in the *WDR08* narrative and, furthermore, the role played within these contradictions by the addition of heterodox and undigested readings of the crisis of agriculture, and their policy remedies. This is done in relation to two *WDR08* themes: (i) the analysis of rural labour markets and their role in poverty reduction and (ii) the conflicting ideas on what constitutes the most promising way of using agriculture for poverty reduction.

Given the space limitations of this short paper, the analysis centres on responses by Oxfam and ActionAid to the *WDR08*.⁴ The choice of these two organizations is based on the fact that their response is in written form, and that they are the largest and most visible NGOs amongst those that prepared a briefing in response to the *WDR08*.

CHALLENGING THE *WDR08* FOR WHAT IT SAYS: CORPORATE POWER AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Both Oxfam and ActionAid challenge *WDR08* thinking on the role of the private sector and, in particular, its views on agribusiness in agricultural development. They are right in exposing the limitations of the *WDR08*'s awareness of the formidable consolidation of corporate power in inputs and retail agricultural markets, given the *WDR08*'s lack of analysis of the implications of this consolidation

⁴ It is interesting to note that Oxfam and ActionAid chose markedly different tones to respond to the Bank. The Oxfam briefing reads like a constructive response in a dialogue between partners in development, with positive and negative remarks on the Report. ActionAid sees no good in what the Bank does. Consider for instance how the two briefings open. Oxfam starts by stating that *WDR08* reflects the new interest in the potential of agriculture, by welcoming 'the broad messages of the *WDR08*' together with pointing out that 'to tackle rural poverty effectively . . . policies for rural development will need to change' (2007, 1). ActionAid on the other hand questions why 'many have welcomed the 2008 World Development Report on Agriculture as a sign of the World Bank's nascent interest in the profession of the world's poorest', given the history of involvement of the Bank with agriculture, and of its pernicious effects, especially of structural adjustment policies [SAPs] (2007, 2).

for the rural poor. It is true that in global commodity chains, contrary to the *WDR08*'s proposition, powerful international companies do not share risks with producers in a symmetric way (Oxfam International 2007, 5). The idea that produce buyers and input suppliers take advantage of power asymmetries in unregulated markets to simultaneously drive prices of outputs down and costs on inputs up, so that the distribution of the fruits of labour is very uneven, is well argued (ActionAid 2007, 13; Oxfam International 2007, 5–6). Through these points the two NGOs reasonably show the socio-economic costs for those at the bottom of the chain of 'cheap gets cheaper' drives by international agribusiness capital. They convincingly show the Bank's need to move away from an ideological belief of the intrinsically benign nature of any private investment, and they call for the regulation of corporate investment, and its enforcement, as an essential element of the rural development agenda.

The two NGOs also effectively bring into check the enthusiasm for Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives which informs the *WDR08*, and more broadly the World Bank and a number of key donors' approaches to private sector policies. Oxfam reminds us that, after all, 'voluntary codes require no enforcement and incur no penalty for violation, and thus do not substitute for effective national legislation' (2007, 6). They might encourage good practice and raise minimum standards but as 'ethical initiatives at the margin' are to be seen as surrogates of 'reform of commercial business practices'. ActionAid pushes the same line (2007, 12).

NOT CHALLENGING *WDR08* WHEN IT CONTRADICTS ITSELF

The response of NGOs to the *WDR08* becomes much less convincing when it comes to detecting, making sense of, and politically exploiting, gross analytical inconsistencies within the report, of which there are no shortage. Both ActionAid and Oxfam fail to do so.

Consider, for example, the coexistence of truly contradictory messages on what is *the most* promising way to use agriculture for development. The *WDR08* tells the reader that 'Improving the productivity, profitability and sustainability of small holder farming is *the main pathway* out of poverty in using agriculture for development' (*WDR08*, 10; emphasis added). This statement sits alongside other *WDR08* passages which constitute a remarkable new area of analysis for the World Bank, suggesting that:

With the poorest most likely to remain in agriculture, increasing wages for agricultural workers is *the area with the greatest potential* to lift millions out of poverty, particularly in Africa. (*WDR08*, 211; emphasis added)

With labour as the main asset of the poor, landless and near-landless households have to sell their labour in farm and non farm activities or leave rural areas. Making the rural labour market a more effective pathway out of poverty is thus a major policy challenge that remains poorly understood. (*WDR08*, 202)

How do Oxfam and ActionAid respond to this analytical confusion?

Oxfam: Lack of Knowledge Behind a Poor Challenge

Oxfam engages with the *WDR08* narrative on both small farming and rural labour markets. With reference to the former, Oxfam comments that ‘The *WDR08* sends a strong signal that . . . small holder farming is a “powerful path out of poverty” . . . This is a much-needed message’ (2007, 2). Indeed for Oxfam it is the first of four ‘step(s) forward’ made by the World Bank with the *WDR08*. Such statements are questionable on a number of grounds. First, they reveal that Oxfam is of the opinion that the *WDR08* focus on small farmers is a departure from existing World Bank thinking. In fact, the opposite is the case: unleashing the potential of small farmers (via removal of unnecessary market regulation) has been at the heart of the World Bank approach to rural development for the past two and a half decades, from the 1981 Berg Report onwards. So the *WDR08* message is no new step. If the World Bank has to be praised here, is for its analytical stubbornness and resilience. The second ‘step forward’ is, as part of this much-welcomed focus on agriculture, the *WDR08*’s emphasis on improving the quantity and quality of investment in small-scale agriculture.⁵ In terms of quantity, Oxfam quotes, and endorses, the *WDR08* figures showing that ‘countries most dependent on agriculture have the lowest levels of public spending’ in agriculture (Oxfam International 2007, 2). A remarkable omission by Oxfam here is the failure to mention the instrumental role played by the World Bank and its structural adjustment policy packages in bringing about a decrease in public spending on agriculture in poor countries. As ActionAid rightly points out, with the imposition of structural adjustment policies, ‘spending priorities for governments were largely shaped by the Bank’s own agenda’ (2007, 9), and this centred on making room for the private sector, whose investment was perceived to have been crowded out by the excessive investment of ineffective states.

As for the call to improve the quality of investment, according to Oxfam, the World Bank ‘rightly emphasises the need to increase donor and government effectiveness, and public participation in national policy-making’ (2007, 2). Oxfam’s endorsement of this particular *WDR08* message can be criticized on a number of grounds. On state effectiveness, whatever goal it might serve, Oxfam fails to acknowledge that the World Bank, is, with the IMF, the organization responsible for ‘sponsoring’, through SAPs, the rolling back of the state from economic management, and the decrease of the size and skill of its work-force. Indeed, as ActionAid puts it, state ‘capacities have been . . . denuded by structural adjustment’ (2007, 21). The shortcomings of Oxfam’s analysis go beyond the failure to underline the Bank’s significant contribution to low state capacity in developing countries since the early 1980s. They also have to do with a lack of problematization of where the Bank’s good governance agenda and its focus on ‘getting institutions right’ comes from. In this respect ActionAid’s response to

⁵ For Oxfam the other *WDR08* steps forward, not discussed in this review, are its call for scaling up aid to climate-change adaptation funds and for the empowerment of producers through organization.

the *WDR08* is stronger as it rightly locates the governance agenda within a self-defensive and hence ‘particular diagnosis of the failures of structural adjustment’ (ibid.), according to which the diktats of SAPs were not fully implemented, and the private sector response to the withdrawal of the state was not as vibrant as expected, due to the ‘weaknesses and lack of credibility of public institutions to enforce appropriate rules of behaviour for the private sector’ (*WDR08*, 30, quoted in ActionAid 2007, 21).⁶ Finally, Oxfam’s approval of the *WDR08*’s call for increased public participation in policy making in developing countries overlooks the fact that fundamental changes will be required in the aid relationship between the International Financial Institutions (IFI), donors and poor countries’ governments if public participation in policy making is to become a reality. Whilst the bargaining power of developing countries vis-à-vis the IFIs varies, it is the case that for most recipients of aid from the IFIs, the accompanying aid conditionalities have set in stone the main thrust of national policy making and national policy direction. This severely constrains the space for ‘public participation’ to policy formulation in developing countries. In this respect ActionAid’s reference to the lack of national ownership of PRSP, as denounced by a coalition of African civil society forces (Jubilee South), is well argued (ActionAid 2007, 21).

Oxfam also engages, with equally unconvincing results, with the *WDR08* analysis on rural labour markets and agrees that ‘working conditions in the agricultural sector are particularly hazardous’ (Oxfam International 2007, 4). Whilst less complacent than its review of the *WDR08* messages on small farming, its critique of the *WDR08* take on rural labour issues is also wanting. Oxfam starts by rightly emphasizing an omission in the *WDR08* analysis, namely that unregulated purchasing practices by agribusiness in global commodity chains ‘base themselves on the casualization, and commensurate feminization, of agricultural labourers’ (ibid.). However, it then takes issue with what it perceives as the *WDR08*’s exclusive focus on increasing the quantity of jobs in rural areas, and its lack of consideration of the quality of these jobs.

This is a weak criticism on two grounds. Firstly, the *WDR08* does focus on the quality of jobs in the labour market. One might agree or disagree with its analysis, but the *WDR08* puts forward a number of ideas on how to improve the quality of jobs poor people have access to. These include boosting the skills and education of the workforce, in order to promote access to (better quality) skilled employment, facilitating migration, and job matching programmes (*WDR08*, 214–20). Secondly, Oxfam makes no comment on the *WDR08*’s advice on how to increase labour demand, which centres on the usual, and unconvincing, call for ‘improving the investment climate’. Such an omission suggests that Oxfam sees the problem of labour quality as unrelated to the problem of labour quantity, which in turn betrays an inadequate understanding of how rural labour markets work for unskilled labourers. As the *WDR08* reminds us, one of the characteristics of rural labour markets in developing countries is ‘the gap between the number

⁶ Page numbers of the *WDR08*’s passage quoted by ActionAid refer to the ‘“almost-final” draft’ of the *WDR08* rather than to the final version of the *WDR08*. See ActionAid (2007, 9, footnote 9).

of new rural workers and the number of new jobs in agriculture' and in the non-farm economy (*WDR08*, 202).⁷ The oversupply of labour has in turn important implications for the bargaining power of unskilled workers over the quality of unskilled work, both in terms of the return from it and the working conditions under which it is performed, as there are little or no grounds for negotiating better deals with labour employers when a multitude of workers in search of work are looming behind. Thus, stepping up the demand for unskilled labour might not be sufficient but is certainly a necessary component of a strategy of improving the quality of labour. Given the inadequacy of Oxfam's apparent understanding of the functioning of rural labour markets, it is no surprise that its formulation of an alternative policy approach to improve returns from labour for poor casual workers does not go beyond a vague and inconclusive statement: 'sustained policy support will be needed to ensure that women receive fair benefits from their participation in the labour force' (Oxfam International 2007, 4).

Interestingly, Oxfam touches upon what is the central message, or inconsistency, of the *WDR08* on rural labour markets, but fails to put it under critical scrutiny. The inconsistency can be illustrated by the *WDR08* statement that the 'policy challenge' on rural labour markets 'is to encourage formality while maintaining flexibility' (*WDR08*, 208): in other words, the challenge of painting a wall black while keeping it white. The formulation of this impossible balancing act, success against which has proved 'elusive' (*WDR08*, 207), follows a remarkable sequence of statements. First, work co-authored by an agricultural trade unionist informs the *WDR08*'s suggestion that the 'employment practices [of unregulated labour contractors] would benefit from more regulation', as they 'can take advantage of workers' in a variety of ways (*WDR08*, 208).⁸ This is followed by the more familiar argument that 'onerous regulations hurt vulnerable groups' and that labour policies 'should be to benefit workers', benefit being 'more employment, whether formal or informal, for the less skilled'. Yet the *WDR08* is aware that the formal sector 'provides better worker protection, a pension, and health security, improves connections to credit markets; and fosters long term investments by firms in workers' and therefore concedes that, 'as a secondary aim labour regulations should be consistent with incorporating a larger share of workers into the formal sector' (*ibid.*; emphasis added).

Clear, isn't it? To reuse the metaphor, the suggestion is that we should paint the wall black whilst keeping it white. But what colour shall we really use? Having put forward the policy challenge, the *WDR08* continues by reminding us that 'Labour market regulations, particularly in middle-income countries, can unwittingly reduce employment demand and encourage informality by imposing

⁷ Quoting FAO figures, *WDR08* sees the gap as growing in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East and in North Africa, and as 'remaining wide' in the other regions of the developing world.

⁸ The work informing the *WDR08* analysis here is by Hurst et al. (2007). According to the WDR unregulated labour contractors can take advantage of workers by 'deducting commissions; holding back wages; imposing debt bondage; and overcharging for transportation, housing and food' (*WDR08*, 208).

high minimum wages' (ibid.). Oxfam does not register the above inconsistent message of 'flexibility with formality' and instead takes issue with the classic neo-liberal argument of 'flexibility versus formality'. This it dismisses as a 'false debate', because it is not 'necessarily correct' that 'raising wages discourages employment' (Oxfam International 2007, 4). However, such a line of argument constitutes no challenge as it misrepresents the neo-liberal take on labour regulations. The neo-liberal position is not against an increase in wages per se; but it would stand against interfering with supply and demand in setting wage levels as this would create rigidities in the labour market, and hurt workers by discouraging labour demand and/or pushing them into informal employment.

In contrast, Save the Children's approach, put forward by the author of this paper at a workshop attended by policy makers, the *WDR08* authors and NGOs held at the Overseas Development Institute in London, focused on demonstrating the inconsistency of the *WDR08* analysis of rural labour markets to the World Bank, emphasizing the progressive elements in it and requesting clarification on their role in the way forward.⁹ As the minutes record, I asked:

I wonder what the Bank's policy message is on rural labour markets? At the end of the chapter 'Moving beyond the farm' the most concrete policy message is that 'much is left to be explored in understanding how to improve rural labour markets'. Yet there is work, which is referenced but not used to inform the analysis of the report, that sets out policy messages on rural labour markets. So the question is, what use did the WDR team make of work on labour markets by authors such as Peter Hurst, and Paola Termine; Cramer, Oya & Sender? What does the Bank think of their policy conclusions? Referencing this work without engaging with it is not enough. (Future Agricultures Consortium 2007, 5)

The *WDR08* has indeed internalized some of the messages of its critics, most notably by implicitly admitting the limitations of its support to 'Labour Force Survey, and Population Census data that classify workers by their main activity [and] typically miss large numbers of casual wage earners' (*WDR08*, 205).¹⁰ However, other parts of its critics' work have been neglected. For example, heterodox researchers have suggested the following policy priorities on rural labour markets which are not part of the *WDR08* analysis: (i) a shift in credit provision from micro-credit to self-employed small farmers to credit to larger-scale labour employers; (ii) the need for developing the organizational capacities of waged workers; (iii) expenditures to educate rural workers to enable them to defend their legal rights in labour markets (Sender et al. 2006, 333).

⁹ My personal involvement might bias my analysis in favour of Save the Children's response to the *WDR08*. However, the disclosure of my role in Save the Children at least makes the reader aware of these circumstances.

¹⁰ Such a statement thus legitimizes and opens the door to activists interested in monitoring whether this admission is being followed by tangible changes in the design of Population Census and Labour Force Surveys supported by the Bank.

The non-answer given by Derek Byerlee, one of the *WDR08* authors, to the amazement of some in the room, was that 'on labour markets, we found too little good evidence, even though we commissioned five background papers on this' (Future Agricultures Consortium 2007, 5). Whilst no major breakthrough, such a failure to bring to life heterodox policy conclusions referenced by the *WDR08*, and even to answer a question on such a failure to do so, can, if further followed up, act as an 'attractor point(s) by enabling those wishing to put new questions on the agenda to claim legitimacy from' the *WDR08* (Wade 2007, 303).

ActionAid: Conspiracy and Populism in Action

ActionAid seems, remarkably, to have skipped the many passages of the *WDR08* in which the Bank's long standing belief in the superior efficiency of small farming is renewed. It exclusively focuses its polemic on the WDR's analysis of rural labour markets, which it interprets as evidence of the Bank's attempts at 'siphoning rural people out of agriculture' (2007, 17). For ActionAid,

The Bank takes the view that small holder agriculture is not an economically viable alternative . . . The Bank suggests that . . . land concentration is a sign that the land is being transferred to 'more efficient' farmers – with the concomitant recommendation that the rural poor should be helped to leave agriculture. (2007, 18–19)

Such a critique of the *WDR08*, informed by both populism and conspiracy, is weak both in itself and for the alternative it suggests. In itself, because, to reiterate, with the *WDR08* the Bank has not turned its back on its faith in the economic viability of small-scale farming – indeed a common ground between the Bank and ActionAid.¹¹ How can one miss, in bold, on the first page of the *WDR08*, the statement that 'Using agriculture as the basis for the economic growth in the agriculture-based countries requires a productivity revolution in small-holder farming' (*WDR08*, 1)? Or that the one chapter on rural labour markets follows six chapters centred, in one way or another, on making 'small-holder farming more productive and sustainable' (*WDR08*, 10)? What about the *WDR08*'s defence of market-led agrarian reform (MLAR), as a strategy that 'can promote smallholder entry into the market, reduce inequalities in land distribution, increase efficiency' (*WDR08*, 9), the critique of which is paradoxically part of ActionAid's response to the *WDR08*?

ActionAid takes issue with two aspects of the Bank's approach to land reform. First it questions the benefits of an exclusive focus on land property rights, 'a central plank in the Bank's agricultural reform programme' which it rightly deems inadequate as 'political and social power increases the security of one's property rights' (ActionAid 2007, 15). The second criticism has to do with

¹¹ Consistent with its inconsistency the *WDR08* contains contradictory positions on the debate on the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity. For a striking example of this see *WDR08* p. 91, in which the *WDR08* both dismisses and supports the existence of the inverse relationship.

the market-led 'willing buyer willing-seller' approach to land reform. In this respect ActionAid questions the evidence behind presumed MLAR success stories (South Africa and Brazil) heralded by the *WDR08*, in line with a wealth of studies sponsored by the World Bank. Thus whilst the *WDR08* sells the cases of South Africa and Brazil as the definitive evidence of the virtues of MLAR, so that 'lessons must be derived from these pioneering experiences for potential wider application' (*WDR08*, 9), Action Aid tells us that the Bank's claim misrepresents 'the results of the reform. It is widely acknowledged in South Africa that the land reform programme has been a disaster' (ActionAid 2007, 16). It should be pointed out that ActionAid falls well short of providing the wealth of evidence – drawing on one research report on land reform in total – to justify this 'wide acknowledgement', and in quoting a drop in human development levels in South Africa from 1995 to 2004 as evidence of the failure of MLAR puts forward a spurious correlation between decrease in HDI levels and the impact of land reform in South Africa. Nonetheless, the point that the 'success' story of MLAR in countries such as South Africa and Brazil does not uphold careful scrutiny (Borras 2003) is valid, if not well argued.

Conspiracy kicks in when ActionAid asks why the *WDR08*, in true World Bank style, references the 'well-proven and successful path of state-led land reform', such as that seen in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, but then 'turn(s) its back on the lessons of history' (ActionAid 2007, 17). The highly unconvincing answer provided by ActionAid to such a question is that the World Bank is keen on 'siphoning rural people out of agriculture completely', as 'the emptying of the countryside is now the only option that the Bank can see to solve the problem of agriculture and development' (ActionAid 2007, 18). The supposed hidden agenda behind the Bank's fabrication of evidence on the benefits of MLAR and of the (long overdue) acknowledgement that many small farmers rely on wages for their social reproduction, is no less than to offer 'economic cover for the political expropriation of the rural poor' (ActionAid 2007, 18). The political violence in rural Colombia, the dispossession of small farmers and the take over of land by large land owners is referred to as an example of the World Bank policy 'explicitly aimed at removing the poorest people from agriculture' (*ibid.*).

The populism of ActionAid's analysis can be seen in its alternative proposition for agricultural development, centred on the virtues of (undifferentiated) small holder farmers. ActionAid shows no awareness of the significance of world-wide trends of socio-economic differentiation amongst 'small farmers', or of the fact that insufficient earnings from indeed unviable own-account farming have forced the poorest amongst small farmers to significantly rely on casual labour for their social reproduction. As the passage below shows, the Bank is the one to blame for problems with small farming: 'that smallholder agriculture has, for the first time in human history, ceased to be a viable economic activity, has much to do with the policies instituted by the Bank' (*ibid.*). It is on the basis of the above romanticized understanding of small farming before structural adjustment (or before the World Bank's existence?) that Action Aid stands against 'the emptying of the countryside'.

What is the alternative then? For ActionAid there are ‘alternatives within agriculture’ and these include land tenure reforms driven by ‘negotiated territorial development approaches, which can reduce the number of land related conflicts by embracing negotiations with communities’ (ibid.). Here ActionAid does not discuss what ‘community’ means, nor which groups are more influential in ‘community negotiations’ and does not engage with heterodox thinking which has exposed the limitations of land reform, whatever form it takes, as the answer to step up agricultural growth (such as, amongst others, Byres 2004a, 2004b; Sender and Johnston 2004). Central to agricultural alternatives are also ‘the policies for comprehensive agrarian reform, as demanded by the world’s poorest farmers’ (ActionAid 2007, 18). According to ActionAid these can be found in forums such as the ‘International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD), [that] has produced a number of recommendations under the umbrella of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations’ (2007, 18). However, as ICARRD ‘vision’ shows (below), ActionAid puts far too much weight on what are very broad goals – and often mutually inconsistent ones – rather than a clearly formulated strategy to achieve agricultural development.

We propose that rural development policies, including those on agrarian reforms, should be more focused on the poor and their organizations, socially-driven, participatory, and respectful of gender equality, in the context of economic, social and environmentally sound sustainable development. They should contribute to food security and poverty eradication, based on secure individual, communal and collective rights, and equality, including, *inter alia*, employment, especially for the landless, strengthening local and national markets, income generation, in particular through small and medium sized enterprises, social inclusion and conservation of the environmental and cultural assets of the rural areas, through a sustainable livelihood perspective and the empowerment of vulnerable rural stakeholder groups. These policies should also be implemented in a context that fully respects the rights and aspirations of rural people, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups, within national legal frameworks and through effective dialogue. (ICARRD 2006, 48)

ActionAid proposes another ‘powerful set of policy alternatives’ as those developed by Via Campesina. For example, the outcomes of its 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty are quoted as ‘concrete policy recommendations’ and as ‘robust and eminently possible policies’. However, a closer look at the outcomes of the Forum, such as the Declaration of Nyeleni, or the Forum synthesis report, do not justify such a claim (Forum for Food Sovereignty 2007a, 2007b). Whilst Via Campesina’s strength lies in exposing the ‘fundamental inequalities that characterize the world food system’ (ActionAid 2007, 24) and perhaps more concretely the fallacies of MLAR, the clarity of, and therefore the political potential of its current formulation of an alternative to a neo-liberal agenda, is once more overstated by ActionAid. Borras, in an insightful assessment of the achievements of Via Campesina’s Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform,

underlines the existence of ‘class-based differences within and between national movements’ (Borras 2008, 276). Different categories of ‘people on the land’ are part of Via Campesina and such difference limits their common ground for an alternative political project. As Borras put it,

rich farmers could be the oppressors of farmworkers; land reform is an issue to be resisted by rich farmers, high price for food products is a good policy for food surplus-producing farmers, bad news for food-deficit rural households, credit facilities and trade issues may not be a critical issue for landless subsistence rural workers who do not have significant farm surplus to sell anyway, wages are not favoured issues by middle and rich farmers but a fundamental issue to rural workers, and so on. (ibid.)

Such heterogeneity thus currently stands in the way of formulating ‘concrete policy recommendations’ to agrarian neo-liberalism. Hence ‘Acknowledging such differences, rather than ignoring or dismissing their significance, is an important step toward finding ways to ensure truly inclusive and effective representation in decision-making and demand-making’ (Borras 2008, 276–7). ActionAid is apparently unaware of the importance of this step.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has assessed the strength of NGOs’ responses to the World Development Report 2008, through an analysis of Oxfam’s and ActionAid’s responses. The analysis first focused on one instance of NGOs’ challenges to the policy messages outlined in the Report. It has shown the strengths of both Oxfam’s and ActionAid’s critiques of the *WDR08*’s benign view of the impact of increasing agribusiness control of agriculture in developing countries, and the strengths of the policy alternatives that the NGOs put forward. The paper has also argued that another level of response to the *WDR08* is required, which would, perhaps, be more likely to contribute to change. Such a response must start from acknowledging the role played by the *WDR08* in the Bank’s project of preserving its hegemony over the development agenda. This entails broadening the common ground on development by incorporating, without digesting, heterodox themes and approaches as to what constitutes the problem in agricultural development, and the solutions to it. This paper has further argued that the existence of internal contradictions are the tangible outcome of this hegemonic project, and that these contradictions potentially legitimize the calls of those interested in further lobbying the Bank for the pursuit of heterodox policy agendas. The capacity of NGOs to detect and make sense of such contradictions, as an entry point to opening up the political space for alternatives to agrarian neo-liberalism, has thus been this paper’s second level of analysis of NGO responses to the *WDR08*.

In this respect, the challenge of both ActionAid and Oxfam to the *WDR08* is weak, albeit for different reasons. Oxfam’s positive reaction to the *WDR08* call for increasing investment in small-scale farming overlooks the contribution of

the Bank to the problem and overstates the novelty of the Bank's faith in the virtues of small farmers. On rural labour markets, Oxfam fails to detect the contradictions of the *WDR08*'s call for 'formality with flexibility', which it misunderstands as 'formality vs flexibility' and even then weakly criticizes. The alternative policy framework suggested by Oxfam is no stronger. ActionAid selectively engages with the *WDR08*'s analysis of rural labour markets, which it misleadingly interprets as evidence of the Bank's mission to empty rural areas of the South. A romantic view of small-scale farming informs its policy alternatives to agrarian neo-liberalism. These are populist and much less robust and concrete than ActionAid seems to believe.

Where does this leave us? How strong was the challenge by ActionAid and Oxfam to the *WDR08*? It is this paper's contention that, given the existence of internal contradictions in the *WDR08*, and the fact that these went mostly unchallenged, NGOs' responses have proved to be, above all, a missed opportunity, and one that needs to be rectified as a first step to a much-needed stronger challenge to the World Bank.

REFERENCES

- ActionAid, 2007. 'The World Bank and Agriculture. A Critical Review of the World Bank's World Development Report 2008', by Raj Patel ([http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/Agricultural%20FINAL%20corrected%20\(low%20res\).pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/Agricultural%20FINAL%20corrected%20(low%20res).pdf)) accessed 29 September 2008.
- Bernstein, H., 1990. 'Agricultural "Modernization" and the Era of Structural Adjustment: Observations on Sub-Saharan Africa'. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 18 (1): 3–35.
- Borras, S., 2003. 'Questioning Market-Led Agrarian Reform: Experiences from Brazil, Colombia and South Africa'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3 (3): 367–94.
- Borras, S., 2008. 'La Vía Campesina and its Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 8 (2–3): 258–89.
- Bretton Woods Project, 2007. 'Failing Small Farmers; The World Bank and Agriculture', *Update 58* (<http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/art-558763>) accessed 1 October 2008.
- Byres, T., 2004a. 'Introduction: Contextualizing and Interrogating the GKI Case for Redistributive Land Reform'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4 (1/2): 1–16.
- Byres, T., 2004b. 'Neo-Classical Neo-Populism 25 Years On: Déjà vu and Déjà Passé: Towards a Critique'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4 (1/2): 17–44.
- Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007a. 'Synthesis Report', Selingue, 23–27 February 2007 (<http://www.nyeleni2007.org/IMG/pdf/31Mar2007NyeleniSynthesisReport-en.pdf>) accessed 1 October 2008.
- Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007b. 'Declaration of Nyeleni', Selingue, 27 February 2007 (<http://www.nyeleni2007.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>) accessed 18 September 2008.
- Future Agricultures Consortium, 2007. 'WDR 2008 workshop', London 20 November 2007 (<http://www.odi.org.uk/plag/resources/reports/07-wdrworkshop-meeting-notes.pdf>) accessed 30 September 2008.
- Hurst, P., P. Termine and M. Karl, 2007. *Agricultural Workers and Their Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development*. Geneva: FAO, ILO and International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations.

- ICARRD, 2006. 'Report of the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development', Porto Alegre, Brazil, 7–10 March 2006 (http://www.icarrd.org/news_down/ICARRD_final_report_En.doc) accessed 30 September 2008.
- Moore, D., 2007. 'Sail on Ship of State: Neoliberalism, Globalisation and the Governance of Africa'. In *The World Bank. Development, Poverty and Hegemony*, ed. D. Moore, 227–66. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Oxfam International, 2007. 'What Agenda Now for Agriculture? A Response to the World Development Report 2008'. Oxfam Briefing Note, by Arabella Fraser and Madelon Meijer (http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/trade/downloads/bn_wdr2008.pdf) accessed 30 September 2008.
- Pincus, J.R. and J.A. Winters, 2002. 'Reinventing the World Bank'. In *Reinventing the World Bank*, eds J.R. Pincus and J.A. Winters, 1–25. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Sender, J. and D. Johnston, 2004. 'Searching for a Weapon of Mass Production in Rural Africa: Unconvincing Arguments for Land Reform'. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4 (1/2): 142–64.
- Sender, J., C. Oya and C. Cramer, 2006. 'Women Working for Wages: Putting Flesh on the Bones of a Rural Labour Market Survey in Mozambique'. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32 (2): 313–33.
- Wade, R., 2007. 'Japan, the World Bank and the Art of Paradigm Maintenance: *The East Asian Miracle* in Political Perspective'. In *The World Bank. Development, Poverty and Hegemony*, ed. D. Moore, 267–316. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press (originally published in 1996 in *New Left Review*, 1 (217): 3–37).
- World Bank, 1989. *Sub-Saharan Africa from Crisis to Sustainable Growth: A Long-Term Perspective Study*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- World Bank, 2007. *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Copyright of *Journal of Agrarian Change* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.