A NEW SPINOUT FROM NUI MAYNOOTH STANDS TO CREATE A BUZZ IN THE BEE INDUSTRY WHICH HAS SUFFERED DEVASTATING DECLINES IN RECENT YEARS
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 at 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 Chukotka case got Gray thinking about 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.

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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; it 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, 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!’

If one party is constantly in the subject position, says Mauus, 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 Chukotka 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?’

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