

NORTH SOUTH COMMUNITY LINKING - A SOUTHERNER'S PERSPECTIVE
an address given at the SE Regional Conference, November 1989
by Johannes Mallah

I feel privileged to be with you this afternoon to give you my views on N/S community linking. I want to thank the pioneers of the whole linking movement in the UK for placing themselves in the vanguard of a revived N/S dialogue. One encouraging sign of their effort is the promising trends in relations between N/S. The interest shown by Local Authorities in Europe and the Cologne Appeal is another example.

Linking relationships between North - especially Europe - and the South is not a new idea. We only have to throw our minds back to the early periods of imperialist expansion when countries in Europe set themselves the task of *discovering*, *civilising* and *educating* the rest of the world - especially countries in the South. We saw the continent of Africa being put on a table and carved into small entities and given to European nations, Britain and France getting the lion's share because of their might.

One weapon provided by the colonialists - education - enabled a few people to agitate for political self determination. Today, most of the countries in the South are self governing. But political independence led to economic dependence. We simply have to reflect on the activities of the multinationals from the North operating in the South to give an indication of what I mean.

The legacy of the past has created a culture of polarised attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes. In the North, it is a feeling of *racial* and *cultural* superiority. This feeling was recently re-echoed by your Prime Minister when she told Commonwealth heads of state in Kuala Lumpur that "the North is rich because her people are hardworking and enterprising while the South - especially Africa - is poor because her people are lazy. If the South wants to be like the North they will have to work harder."

Today, we observe new forms of international relationships between North and South (UK Commonwealth, etc) where people meet and discuss global matters. This is followed by extensive media coverage of the whole South. The media conception of the South presented to people in the North emphasises chaos, *turmoil*, *natural disasters*, *wars*, *corrupt governments and mass poverty*. These images present us as victims of our own helplessness. The whole of the South is suffering from an endemic disease - *underdevelopment* - and we are looking to the North for the cure - *development*. This media presentation of the South has led the North to set herself yet another task - *saving* the South from itself. Hence we see the transfer of aid, cash, goods, services and expertise through agencies like IMF, World Bank, charities, from the North to the South. For most people in the North who have very little contact with the South, charity offers the only apparent means by which they can participate in the development movement taking place in the latter.

Third World aid and charity work obscures and thereby reinforces the unequal power relations which lie at the root of impoverishment. Inherent in the notion of charity and aid is the assumption that people in the North must help people in the South, who are incapable of taking control of their lives and managing their own environments. So aid and charity have become not only a product of the unequal power relations which has created impoverishment in the first place, but themselves represent the practice and continuation of a particular set of unequal relations between aid and charity supporters and Third World beneficiaries.

Against this backdrop of ongoing N/S relations a new concept - community linking - has emerged. This is a relationship between ordinary people from both North and South who feel that we live in One World and we are interdependent. Through a link, we are able to forge bonds of friendship, mutual understanding and mutual respect between

the people in our different communities, with different lifestyles, different cultures and different living standards. We believe that in a one world, what we do abroad can bring positive changes for other people. In like manner what we do or don't do at home is equally important for bringing about those changes because of the interdependent nature of the world.

In community linking, like in past relationships, the initiative is coming from the North and in the face of all the overtures it is not surprising for the following questions to arise in the South: "What do these people want from us again?" How well do they relate with minority groups in their midst?" Do they have equal opportunities in education, employment, etc for all the races in their midst?" For those of us who have embraced linking, you may well ask: "Why have you agreed to link with us?" Our answer is simple. We see linking as a much closer relationship at the personal, group, and organisational level which will provide an opportunity for closer contact with people in the North. Once we have been able to forge these close relationships it is possible to initiate a dialogue about development and environmental issues.

You people in the North are fortunate because you have a lot of voluntary agencies working overseas in the field of development cooperation. More recently they have started using part of their funds to raise awareness about development issues in Britain. You can make use of them to expend your own activities in raising awareness through mass education. Since they are working overseas you should try to let them know that development does not just involve the construction of roads, the sinking of wells or building of dams etc but also involves such unquantifiable attributes as personal values, value for people, how people relate with each other and how they interact with their environment. These attributes are mostly found in the South. These are development attributes - development of people - which the North can learn from the South.

Community linking has had a few successes - there has been movement by way of exchange visits from both communities. During these visits people have learnt a lot from each other and there is a gradual change in people's attitudes. People are learning why people from both North and South behave in certain ways. People especially from the South are now learning that Britain like most countries in the North is not the land of milk and honey they have believed her to be. Britain too has her own pockets of poverty and misery in the midst of plenty. There have also been exchanges of gifts. People from both communities have been involved in development projects identified or initiated by people from the South. Perhaps the greatest success has been for once we have been able to tell our Northern partners to listen to us because all along they have been taking decisions on our behalf. This has culminated in a meeting planned for 1990 in Zimbabwe involving mostly Southerners.

Finally I want to end by saying that the central theme in community linking is the raising of awareness through education, campaigning, exchange visits, seminars, workshops, information sharing in schools, churches, offices, farms, etc, that attitudes have to change.

Nowadays we should be thinking of interdependence rather than dependence; equal partnership and mutual respect rather than superior and inferior race and culture; one world rather than N/S, developed and underdeveloped; awareness and understanding of the complexity of life and relationships in a person to person context, rather than ignorance, backwardness, and providing of pat answers to all the global problems.

These ideals are not easy to achieve but I think with time, commitment, cooperation and good will, we will succeed in making this planet what it is was created for and make it a more congenial place to live in for generations yet unborn.