

Overseas Alms Dealers Target New Zealand Market

By David Small

Overview, Issue 41, 1991

Just when you thought there were too many agencies competing for the overseas aid dollar in New Zealand, two more have set up office in Auckland. Both are branches of multi-national networks and appear to have sufficient foreign finance to elbow their way onto the scene in the relatively small New Zealand market. Christian Children's Fund projects an emotive image based on conservative Christianity that is virtually indistinguishable from World Vision: problem, starving children; solution, child sponsorship. The other new arrival, Oxfam New Zealand, claims to be a progressive agency that addresses the real causes of poverty. This article examines why Oxfam is here and argues that it represents a step backwards in the work for international justice and development.

Oxfam New Zealand, a branch of the international Oxfam network, was launched in the lavish surrounds of Turnbull House earlier this year. On the strength of Oxfam's international respectability, it received a hearty welcome from a range of dignitaries and the media, with at least three major daily newspapers giving it uncritical full-page coverage. Oxfam's international office in London refers all enquiries about the new branch back to one man, David Armstrong, the Director of Community Aid Abroad (CAA), the Australian member of Oxfam. CAA is bankrolling Oxfam New Zealand and it will be sent all the donations that the new branch receives for the next three years. Oxfam New Zealand hopes to give the Australians a good return on their investment. Chairperson Keith Johnston says that the group will concentrate its energy on raising the money "and hand it over to an organization (they) trust in terms of delivery".

Oxfam's arrival was organized like a foreign take-over bid with virtually no consultation with established New Zealand agencies. Its first public fundraising event, a sponsored walk, clashed with the annual appeal slot of the New Zealand Red Cross. Many agencies, including Christian World Service (the development agency of the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa/New Zealand) expressed grave concern about Oxfam's methods and objectives. But the agencies Oxfam was in most direct conflict with were two home-grown and progressive New Zealand agencies, Corso and Trade Aid. Trade Aid expressed outrage at Oxfam's announcement that it was planning to import handicrafts from Third World countries and promote them through a mail-order catalogue in direct competition with Trade Aid. Trade Aid's protests appear to have succeeded in forcing some compromise from Oxfam, although the issue has generated some tensions within Trade Aid itself. Oxfam's real objective however, is to replace Corso as this country's leading secular development agency.

Oxfam New Zealand claims (*The Dominion*, 8 March 1991) to be "filling a gap in the market". It argues that there is currently no effective channel for New Zealanders to support the development projects that it says it will fund. In fact, however, many of the overseas projects Oxfam is seeking funds for are very similar to ones which Corso has funded for many years and which it continues to fund. Corso already offers everything Oxfam New Zealand is proposing as well as a separate fund for Māori development, but Oxfam New Zealand justifies its establishment here by putting about the lie that Corso no longer exists. More than a year after Oxfam's founders were getting television journalists to prepare an obituary for Corso, they are still publicly attacking the organization through media outlets, ever eager to put the knife into Corso.

Oxfam New Zealand's obsession with attacking Corso stems from the fact that Oxfam New Zealand was founded by a minority faction that had split from Corso. The most fundamental point of disagreement between this faction and the majority group that stayed with Corso is the question of support for Māori development. This is an issue that Corso has been wrestling with for many years. It goes to the heart of Corso's existence as a progressive development agency seeking to stand in solidarity with

people's struggles for justice and self-determination throughout the world. The mainstream media have given extensive coverage to the opponents of Corso's Aotearoa Putea. For them, the only thing better than Māori-bashing or Corso bashing is bashing both at once. For people interested in justice and development, however, it is very important to go behind what the media say and understand what actually happened. What is Corso's position? Why did it change? And how did this Change take place?

The Development Debate

Towards the end of the 1960's when it became clear that, despite the "Development Decade", the gap between the rich and poor had widened rather than closed, people within some aid agencies began to see that more of the same old approach to aid was not going to solve the problem. In 1971, Rev Nicholas Stacey resigned in disillusionment as Deputy-Director of Oxfam in Britain, posing the question:

"Should aid agencies be content with raising money, knowing that however great their efforts and however generous the public, it will make only the slightest dent in the problem?"

The debate on this critical question led to major splits within and between agencies. Some, like Corso, radically changed their strategies for dealing with the problem of Third World poverty and injustice. Serious efforts were made to address the political, economic and cultural causes of the problem. One of the results of this process of evaluation was the abandoning of lucrative fund-raising schemes like child sponsorship, which 'package' poverty for Western consumption and personalize what is essentially a structural problem. Agencies that refused to change justified their approach by claiming that the changes being suggested would antagonize their donors:

"Many people would simply stop supporting us financially. What's the point of having morally clean but financially empty hands? The important

thing is to raise funds so we can support worthwhile activities in the Third World. Others will have to tell the unpleasant truths."

The development debate forced agencies to make a conscious decision: whether to be constrained by the largely ill-informed attitudes of their donors, or to address the real needs of the world's poor and oppressed. Corso's decision to be more recipient-oriented than donor-oriented cost it public support in New Zealand, and eventually led to it incurring the wrath of the Muldoon government in 1979 for becoming "too political". The government criticized Corso for supporting "terrorists" in Southern Africa and removed its tax-deductible status.

However, a bigger challenge awaited Corso. It was a controversial move for Corso to point out that the same processes that generated poverty and oppression in the Third World were also creating inequalities in New Zealand. But everyone in Corso knew it would be much more serious to give financial support to groups which struggled against these forces in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the challenge for Corso to address this issue became increasingly strong. It came from a number of sources and built up over several years.

The issue was first placed squarely before the organization by Father John Curnow in a keynote address to the 1982 Corso Annual Assembly. While congratulating Corso for "facing up to the hard issues that surfaced during the development debate" and "providing a lead for other agencies", Curnow also made it clear that more needed to be done:

"Many of our Asian partners whom I know very well have now decided that while our money has some value, of course, the chief test of our credibility is this: are we in fact linked in the same sorts of struggles and taking the same sorts of risks as they are taking?"

The following year, Curnow's message was reinforced by one of Corso's Indian project partners during a visit to the country. Vikas Bhai said:

"You must realize that groups in India will not talk with Corso if they know that you are not involved in the serious struggle. And if you come as the moneybag, then the dialogue will be limited to the moneybag. After all, why should we accept you as anything more than what you represent - white colonial culture? Solidarity must be proven - it cannot be taken for granted."

The issue surfaced in a more practical context in New Caledonia during a meeting with a grass-roots Kanak group with whom Corso was seeking to develop a partnership. The group had a policy of refusing development funding from the French Government. When they heard Corso was a New Zealand agency, they wanted to know what support the organization gave to the Māori people before they would proceed to discuss any funding relationship. It was about this time that Māori groups began to front up in person to Corso meetings. They pointed out the inconsistency in, for example, Corso supporting development projects of other indigenous peoples in the Pacific and refusing to support similar projects for Māori development. The issue could be ignored no longer.

Knowing how delicate the issue of funding Māori development would be, Corso decided to spend a year on an internal discussion of the issues. During this period, Corso groups throughout the country as well as member organizations spent many hours, days and weekends considering how to respond to the challenges Corso was facing. As Corso's National Education Officer at the time, I had the task of providing the information and resources for this consultation process. I travelled the country and participated in dozens of sessions where Corso people analyzed the political and economic structures of New Zealand society and the world, the principles they believed Corso should maintain and, in the light of this, how they believed Corso should respond to the challenges it faced. This long process culminated in the 1984 Annual Assembly, held at the Newtown Community Centre in Wellington. After a rigorous and exhaustive discussion and debate, a position was adopted which was

acceptable to the vast majority of those present (39 for, 6 against, 3 abstentions). The Assembly decided to allow Corso to "provide funding for groups working to overcome injustice and oppression in Aotearoa as long as that funding came not from general funds but from money specifically raised or contributed for funding in Aotearoa".

Thus, the Aotearoa Development Fund (now called the Aotearoa Putea) was established. Tribally-based representatives from throughout the country who administer the fund decided that the priority would be to support Māori rural development projects. This approach was designed to make a positive contribution to Māori self-determination while at the same time not being too alienating for donors. Since 1985, the Aotearoa Putea has been offering New Zealanders a rare chance to contribute directly to grass-roots projects. Small-scale fishing enterprises, the establishment of tribal radio, Kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori immersion primary schools run on the Kohanga Reo model) and communal land development are among the initiatives that the Aotearoa Putea has supported. The ideas and energy are Māori, and Corso provides some funding support. For Corso, the new policy provided a framework for allowing individual donors to specify whether their money was to be channeled overseas, or to local projects while at the same time allowing Corso as an organization to make a commitment to both overseas and local funding. Since Corso has always allowed donors to specify that their donation be used in, for example, Nicaragua, Africa, the Philippines or wherever, it was logical to also make this provision for Aotearoa.

This was a policy that allowed Corso to move forward in a way which complemented its overseas work. As then Corso General Secretary, Ross Stevens, explained:

“The effect of the 1984 Assembly is not to turn Corso away from its international project work and its international partners, but to increase the parameters within which Corso can work to include justice issues at home”.

But these comments could not compete with media headlines like "Corso threatens the bona fides of all aid organizations". Nor did they get anything like the coverage

of the views of David Cuthbert, a former Corso Projects Chairperson and a founding trustee of Oxfam New Zealand. In a replay of his highly publicized resignation from Hart, the New Zealand Anti-Apartheid Movement, over its focus on domestic racism, Cuthbert turned on Corso. He used his position to gain prime-time television coverage, attacking the new policy and predicting a steady "haemorrhage" of public support from Corso. Less than three years later, Cuthbert rejoined Corso as Treasurer with the backing of those who had stayed and tried to block Corso from implementing the policy it had so overwhelmingly voted for. After failing to produce annual accounts for two consecutive years, Cuthbert resigned a second time, again in a highly-public manner, accusing Corso on prime-time television of being "morally and financially bankrupt".

A Question of Integrity

What was it about the Aotearoa Putea that moved people to fight it so bitterly? Some of the opposition was based on the claim that other agencies are already involved in this area of work and that Corso's role should be to focus on overseas issues. There is, however, no comparable Māori development fund operating in this country. And even if there were a dozen such funds, there would still be no excuse for Corso to ignore the issue. It is a question of integrity: Corso has no option but to support Māori development. The alternative - slamming the door on the Māori people - would have been the first step down the slippery slope of abandoning principle for money.

Overseas agencies like Oxfam are able to ignore this issue in part because New Zealand does not fit their definition of a Third World country. But for a New Zealand organization like Corso, there is no escaping it. Imagine how ridiculous it would seem if a white South African group raised money to fight poverty and oppression in other countries but refused to support black South Africans struggling against Apartheid. Corso had spent the last two decades identifying colonial domination as a major source of the gross inequalities in wealth and power that exist in today's world.

It could not possibly justify turning its back on the legitimate aspirations of the indigenous people of its own country.

"Māori people are not starving to death" the Oxfam people used to say during the debates in Corso. But the national health and education statistics, together with high rates of unemployment, imprisonment and other critical social indicators read like a horror story for the Māori people. Theirs, in a very real sense, is a life-and-death struggle. As such, it represents a serious challenge for every socially-concerned organization in New Zealand. It needs to be understood that the task of promoting Māori development directly parallels the development work Corso contributes to overseas. People tend to associate aid and development agencies with starving children because of the extensive advertising campaigns of the wealthy conservative organizations like World Vision. However, Corso aid goes to feed people on the brink of starvation only in large-scale emergencies like the current famine in the Horn of Africa.

Another argument used against Corso's Aotearoa Putea is that the most direct parallel between New Zealand and the Third World is not its colonial heritage but its economic policies of selling its national assets to foreign capital and impoverishing working people and beneficiaries. While these are critical issues, racial injustice cannot be pushed to one side because of them. New Zealanders have been paralyzed in their ability to oppose current policies without genuine alliances being formed between Māori and the dominant Pakeha population. This was clearly demonstrated when Māori groups tried to block the State Owned Enterprises Bill, only to be widely accused in Pakeha circles of seeking to dispossess non-Māori New Zealanders of their heritage.

Some of the people who founded Oxfam New Zealand used to argue during the Corso debates that it was not the principle of funding Māori development projects they opposed, but the particular Māori groups and individuals Corso was associated with. If this view was genuinely held however why have these people not set up an

alternative Māori development fund within Oxfam New Zealand instead of emphasizing the fact that all their money will be sent overseas? A great deal of the conflict that plagued Corso for so long came from the perception of the Māori within Corso that this anti-Māori faction was trying to drive them out. There was a serious and disturbing level of mistrust.

At this point, I would like to make clear my own part in the debate. I do not agree with everything that any Māori has said or done in Corso and I do actually agree with some of the points made by this other faction. However, I also know that there could have been no genuine discussion of these differences until trust had been established. The first step towards building that trust had to be for Corso to 'make an unequivocal commitment to seriously address the valid and pressing concerns of Māori people. If Oxfam New Zealand gets established here, it will mean one more organization seeking to remove Māori people and their concerns from the agenda of the development debate.

In deciding to allow its Australian arm to bankroll a group consisting mainly of an anti-Māori faction that had split from Corso, Oxfam International placed its reputation on the line. It is reprehensible for a foreign organization with progressive pretensions to have taken sides in this issue of critical importance not just to Corso and the development community in New Zealand, but to the entire country. The move raises serious doubts about Oxfam's claim to be sensitive to local concerns in the Third World countries where it operates. To Oxfam's credit though, some of its member bodies are already questioning this move. The National Board of Oxfam Canada, for example, which is itself wrestling with the nature of its relationship with the Native American peoples of Canada, has challenged the International Oxfam Conference about the decision to set up in competition with a New Zealand agency which shares Oxfam's development philosophy.

Corso has survived a very testing time. From 1984 to 1989, the debate over funding in New Zealand was intense and traumatic and also highly publicized. True to form,

Corso has tackled this latest challenge head-on and once again broken new ground in the development debate. But, as with so many of its trail-blazing policies over the last 47 years, it has been publicly scarred in the process. Squeaky clean Oxfam New Zealand with its safe British status, its foreign funding and its plausible promises bears none of these scars. While promoting the lie that Corso is dead, it is piously proclaiming that "there is no point in aid agencies arguing amongst themselves".

If Oxfam New Zealand is able to gain enough support to survive after its foreign finance runs out, ten years of progress and development thinking and action in New Zealand will be seriously jeopardized. If Oxfam succeeds in its attempt to remove Māori concerns from the development agenda, it will return New Zealand aid and development work to the limited task of providing charitable handouts. Genuine international solidarity is incompatible with anti-Māori policy.

Since the anti-Māori faction left, Corso has undergone a spectacular turn-around and reversed a vicious downward spiral. It is now debt-free and on a sound financial footing; volunteer numbers and 'energy' have been increasing; donations are up and funding commitments to project partners in Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific and to the Aotearoa Putea have all been maintained. This has been possible because the unprecedented level of Māori/Pakeha trust within Corso (although we still have some way to go) is enabling people to get on with the real work of the organization. Corso is proving that it is possible for a homegrown New Zealand agency to be an effective force for justice and development throughout the world.