Hung out to dry
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HUNG OUT TO DRY

RICHARD MILTON EXPOSES ANOTHER DISASTROUS WORLD BANK INTERVENTION, ALL DONE IN THE NAME OF AID.

One object lesson from the Arab world that the WTO would have done well to study carefully is the case of Yemen. In 30 short years, with World Bank cash and Western 'know-how', Yemen has been transformed from a mediaeval society to a modern developed country complete with Westminster-style elected parliament with women MPs and cabinet ministers. At the same time, though, it has gone from being a country that produced more than 1 million tonnes of grain annually in the 1970s to one producing barely 150,000 tonnes today, and a country where a crisis in the supply of drinking water is so acute that people in the second city, Taiz, wait up to 40 days for their taps to run.

The decline was documented in a film, *The Hanging Gardens of Babylon*, by English agricultural engineer, Tony Milroy, director of The Arid Lands Initiative, a charity formed to study Yemen's successful traditional methods of water management and to campaign for their re-introduction both in Yemen and elsewhere. Milroy was first struck by the skill of Yemen's farmers as world experts in the management of arid lands in the early 1980s, when drought hit Ethiopia and Sudan. As the people in those countries died, only 60 miles away across the Red Sea, under similar climate and conditions, Yemen came through unscathed.

The reason, he discovered, was their traditional method of farming in a unique closely co-operative partnership, sharing available rainwater in a remarkably efficient system of terracing and irrigation. Yet when he returned at the end of the decade, Milroy found the same systems were in crisis. What had happened in the interim was the oil boom – and a rush to 'modernise' Yemen's agriculture by Western aid agencies.

Tens of millions of pounds were poured in to promote modern, western-style, irrigated agriculture, but, says Milroy, 90 per cent of the aid went to a small number of farmers who had access to diesel pumps and irrigation equipment – those who were willing to abandon traditional methods and accept Western ideas. 'The effect of this intervention was disastrous,' he says. 'The traditional Yemeni method of agriculture is based on managing flood irrigation. Huge volumes of spate floods coming down from the mountains are distributed by a system of embankments, so water sinks into the soil and is stored in the top couple of metres. The grain they sow chases the water down and is deep rooted. There is enough water for the whole crop and any salt in the water is flushed away to the water table.'

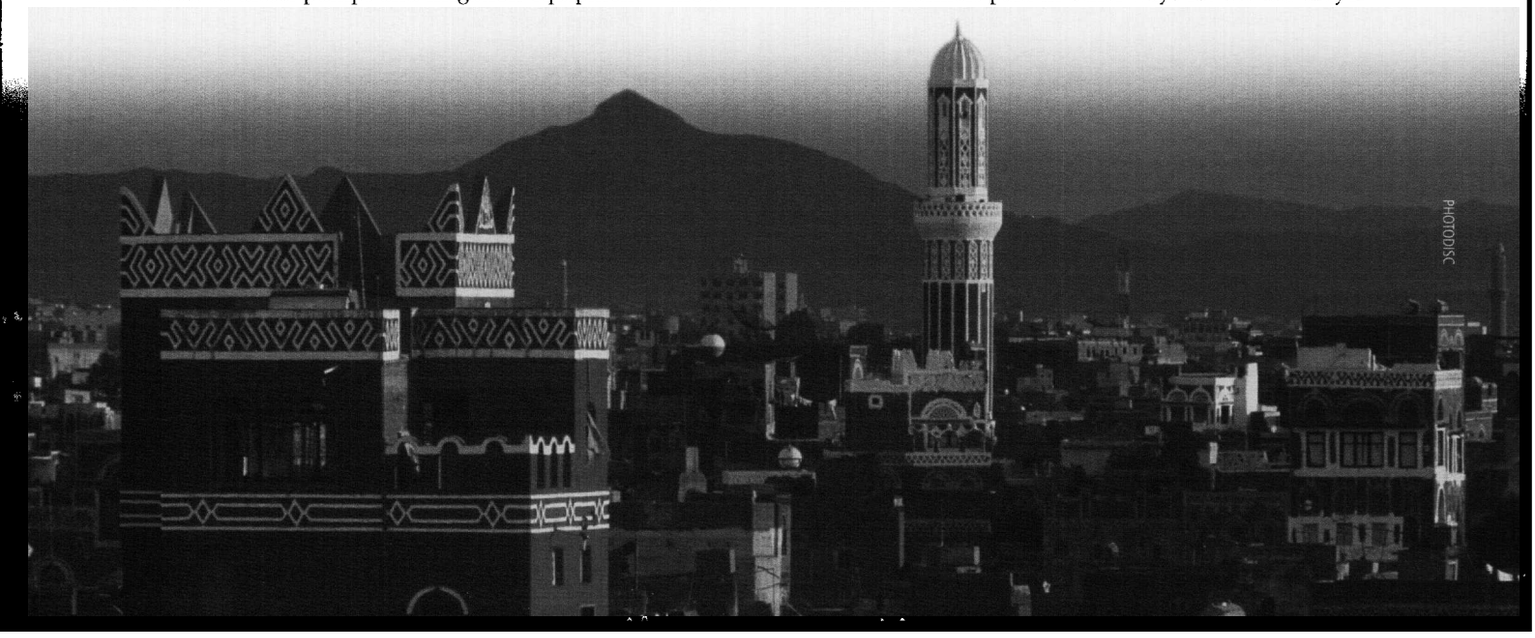
By contrast, modern pumped irrigation methods dribble small amounts of water in the top six inches of soil with the result that crops are rooted only inches deep and hence prone to collapse when water is short. More seriously, salt is not flushed down into the water table but stays in the topsoil, gradually building up. This quickly makes the soil unusable for further cultivation. 'Worldwide,' says Milroy, '50 per cent of the land brought under cultivation by modern methods of irrigation becomes unusable within five years because of the salt content. So traditional methods lasted hundreds of years. Modern "scientific" methods lasted five.' Rather than the successful traditional conservation methods, the approach favoured by aid agencies is to drill and keep on drilling, looking for new water sources. But the overall effect of this is to plunder the existing aquifers, depleting the water table further.

Dam fools

Another part of the intervention in Yemen was the investment of over $50 million in major engineering to trap the spate floodwaters from the mountains. Teams of Western consulting engineers and contractors set to work. But instead of following traditional methods and building a diversion structure that would spread the floodwater over large areas, they built the huge Swiss-financed Amera dam outside Taiz City, which today merely contains stagnant, sewage-polluted water, and which attracts malarial mosquitoes giving rise to periodic outbreaks of the disease.

'It was at this time that our film came out and the UN and the World Bank started to get a bit embarrassed,' says Milroy, 'because by then there had been such an enormous subsidy for pump-irrigation that the water tables, which had been efficiently managed for hundreds of years by traditional methods, were drying up. Most of the land that was being brought under cultivation was either running out of water or getting terrible salt problems.'

Yemen's farmers paid in other ways for the aid they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received. Alongside the aid agencies, the World Food Programme started bringing in grain. As elsewhere in the world, US wheat was made available at subsidised prices meaning local growers were no longer able to compete on price. This not only impoverished the farmers but, more importantly, devastated the irrigation systems, since the money was no longer available to maintain traditional systems.

Ironically, it was the Gulf War that reversed the decline. Around a million Yemenis were ejected from other Gulf states such as Saudi and Kuwait and returned home. This had a rejuvenating effect on Yemen's terraces and traditional systems because those returning had to go back to the land and so they renovated the derelict traditional systems.

But, although the decline of traditional agriculture has been arrested, the root cause of the problem – misconceived and misdirected Western aid – remains, and its effects are still felt. And so far, the World Bank and aid agencies show few signs of learning from their mistakes. 'In the past two years we've watched a £12 million World Bank pilot scheme for ground water management in Yemen fail – and we've documented it on video,' says Milroy. 'They know it's failed, but they're going to go ahead with a £100 million expansion of the scheme.'

The pilot scheme tried to tackle the crisis in drinking water running out because of the plundering of the ground water resources for irrigation. The £12 million went on drilling contracts, looking for water and not finding it, and distributing the inevitable bribes to landowners.

'They're now going to do the same again on a larger scale in a number of other cities,' says Milroy. 'We've talked to the farmers, we've talked to the engineers and we've talked to the scientists and they're all well-meaning people but they simply don't have any way to stop the steamroller. They have a mechanism where they come in and do post-project evaluations but it's a charade. They don't have any mechanisms to say: "This was a disastrous mistake. Let's learn from it".'

The World Bank's money could solve the problem it has caused. But the World Bank doesn't have the mechanisms and skills and know-how to work alongside the traditional networks of farmers. The philosophy of the Western aid agencies is – if there is a new problem, it has to have some kind of new, modern solution. For them there is nothing in the last 4,000 years of human history that has any relevance to this new problem.

'The main difficulty is you can't make money out of this indigenous know-how. You can make money when you come in with pipes and diesel pumps and concrete dams, but with know-how there's no 10 per cent fee on offer,' comments Milroy. 'Meanwhile most people in the Third World are tip-toeing along the edge of starvation. They have a very acute sense of what their problems are, in which order they could solve them, what resources they need to solve them. My experience of the last 30 years is that people are very clear about what their constraints are. And the aid organisations then have to explore new ways in which the large sums of money which these people deal in, find new mechanisms to help indigenous organisations to come together, to federate, so that they can manage these large sums of money more effectively.'

Richard Milton is a writer and journalist. His latest book, ***Bad Company****, is reviewed on page 77.*

TO WHALE OR NOT TO WHALE?

ACCORDING TO RECENT POLLS, 75 PER CENT OF ICELANDIC PEOPLE BACK WHALING. JOURNALIST **SIGRÚN DAVÍDSDÓTTIR** UNCOVERS THE ATTITUDES UNDERPINNING THIS HUGE SUPPORT AMONG HER COUNTRYMEN, AND EXAMINES THE ICELANDIC GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE.

The environment is a very real issue in Iceland and the debate here reflects the attitude of people living directly from nature's resources. It also highlights the tension between old attitudes and new trends. Icelanders have pursued whaling for many centuries but, unlike the Norwegians, Canadians or Japanese, are not a whaling nation. In the past whaling around Iceland was mostly carried out by foreigners. Yet in 1986, Iceland fought against the moratorium on whaling, set by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) – bona fide or not, in Iceland the whaling issue is more a matter of principle than any pressing need to whale.

From the 15th century onwards, Basque and later Dutch and Norwegian whalers frequented the sea around Iceland. At the end of the 19th century, Norwegians and other nations ran whaling stations around the Icelandic coast. In 1916, Iceland banned whaling in order to get rid of the foreign whalers and protect its dwindling stocks. The ban was not abolished until an Icelandic whaling company, Hvalur hf (Whale Ltd), commenced operations in the late forties. Since then, this company has been the only one in Iceland hunting for whales, mostly sei and fin whale.

As elsewhere, whaling in Iceland was a seasonal activity and most of the meat was exported. In economic terms, whaling amounted to roughly 2 per cent of the export of fish products.

When the Icelandic parliament debated whether to protest against the IWC 1986 moratorium, parties were split and, with only a single vote majority, the parliament finally voted against contesting the ban. However, there was little sympathy with foreign views against whaling and it only fuelled anger when in 1986, 'eco-warrior' Paul Watson and his fellows on *Sea Shepherd* sank two whaling vessels. As time passed, the Icelandic politicians seemed at a loss against the growing anti-whaling lobby at the IWC, which they felt dictated its policies. Thus Iceland left the IWC in 1992, forfeiting its right to scientific whaling, used by Japan and Norway. Only a few voices whispered that by leaving the IWC, Iceland left the only international forum where whaling policies could be influenced. Thus Iceland attempted, unsuccessfully, to re-join the IWC last summer, adhering to the convention on whaling, but stating its reservations on the commercial moratorium.

As Árni Mathiesen, the minister of fisheries, points out, whaling is impossible if Iceland remains outside the IWC. No one will buy whale products from non-member countries. Following a recent meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister, Halldór Ásgrímsson, the Icelandic minister of foreign affairs, was quoted as saying that Icelanders would 'have to take up whaling again', and that Japan was the market for whale products. But it is not that simple. Norway, for example, has

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