

English version of preface by Joseph Hanlon to "Cólera e catarse" by Carlos Serra (2003)

How do we deal with a rapidly changing world which seems to only make our lives worse? We often blame the "other" or the "outsider". Carlos Serra and his team have produced an extraordinary study of this phenomenon in Nampula province, where poor people responded violently in a deeply held belief that rich and powerful outsiders were putting cholera in their water in an attempt to kill them. The response was violence against the outsiders and their allies in the community, and passive resistance against the institutions of the state.

The reaction to that violence was also one of blame – Frelimo blamed Renamo for a campaign of disinformation and the powerful blamed the poor for their ignorance. But one of the key findings of the study is that people's response to cholera, albeit wrong, was not the result of disinformation but rather was rational and logical.

Readers of this book will "know" that chlorine in water helps to prevent the spread of cholera, and thus will "know" know that local people were wrong in their belief that putting chlorine in the water was a cause of cholera. But some modesty is called for on our part. How different is the cholera debate in Nampula from the HIV/AIDS debate in South Africa, in which the President himself, one of the world's most respected leaders, questioned the wisdom and understanding of the some of the world's most eminent scientists? Or consider the world of development economics, where writers such as myself accuse the IMF and World Bank of being false priests only representing the interests of the rich, while they, in turn accuse me and my colleagues of ignorance and economic illiteracy.

This study is particularly good for the subtlety of its understanding of the way in which the objections to chlorine may have been scientifically unfounded, but reflected a well-founded social and political understanding. In particular, the study finds that the campaign against chlorine in the water was not a campaign against the state or against modernising, but rather just the opposite. It was a protest against a state which had become distanced from the people, which only appeared before elections, and which increasingly failed to provide services and a better standard of living. It was not against modernity, but against the failure to provide the fruits of modernity.

The report notes that this was a protest often led by unemployed youth who saw no future for themselves, and whose actions had the tacit backing of their elders. It became a protest against authority figures – regulos, government officials, and NGO workers, who were seen as distant, arrogant, and, most importantly, not delivering. The red motorcycles of SNV extortionists driven dangerously and at high speed through villages, became a strong symbol of arrogance and distance. Serra and his team conclude that the protests against chlorine in the water revealed "uma profunda intranquilidade, uma falta de confiança no Estado."

This study is important because, by asking local people what they really think, it sets out in detail the climate of distrust and disempowerment. The symbols of disempowerment come out repeatedly in the interviews. A series of natural phenomena – unexplained crop and human diseases, drought, and reduced fish catches – merge with symbols of malign outside power – unemployment and closed factories, NGO motorcycles and cars in general, and the bribes demanded by health workers. The passive and violent resistance to putting chlorine in local water supplies needs to be seen as local people making a desperate attempt to regain some power; as a case of a disempowered group finally taking a stand to defend its very lives.

People interviewed for this study raised fundamental questions about the actions of those who were even a little bit richer and more powerful. If a nurse or health post worker normally demands a bribe to provide proper treatment, why should they be trusted when they say they are giving chlorine free? If an arrogant NGO helps only a select few, why should it suddenly be trusted to help the poorest on a key health issue? If government actions have only led to increasing poverty and loss of jobs, why trust the government now? And if local chiefs and party secretaries have used their links with the outside to collect taxes and increase their own power, why should they be trusted to help now?

This deep-seated distrust is shown most starkly by the response to epidemiology. Health officials held meeting with local elites to say that cholera was likely to spread to their area and this was backed up by radio programmes and other publicity. Local people asked: How do these people in the city know that cholera is coming? Of course, they must be bringing it. They deny it, of course, but these are the same people who told us that voting for Frelimo would bring us a better future and that closing the local cashew nut processing factory would help the peasants.

The NGOs and health workers and local chiefs were sincere in their attempts to control cholera, but local people were also right to ask who was standing behind these people, and why was their "help" going to be beneficial this time when it had not been in the past. In their way, local people have proved to be more sophisticated than many government staff and aid workers, because they look at issues in context – they ask who stands behind and who will gain. They showed an understanding that the interests of the rich and poor are different, and their distrust claims by the rich to be "helping" the poor are well founded. Are claims to be

helping simply a cover for a new form of exploitation?

From World Bank staff and ministers in Maputo with their fine houses and chauffeured Volvos, down to local NGO staff and agricultural extension workers, most of those involved in “development” believe sincerely in what they are doing to help the poor, believe sincerely that their task is to convince the poor to act differently, and believe sincerely that they deserve to be well rewarded for dedicating their lives to help those who they see as ignorant and backward. But on the ground, the poor see that the only people who seem to gain are those who come to “help”. The poor have every reason to ask if the sincere priests and health workers and NGO staff sent into rural areas are not just an attempt to build up trust so that the poor can be better exploited. And they have every reason to distrust the local leaders who ally themselves with the new outside exploiters. The poor see a chain that goes back to the colonial era of people who come to “civilise” them.

This study also points to a fundamental contradiction. How do “we”, the rich and powerful who read and write books, convince “them”, the poor and weak, that this time, at least, we are really trying to “help” them. This question is shared both by those who really do want to help by curbing cholera and those who simply want to find new ways to exploit the poor. It is the question of the advertising industry – do we use the same techniques to explain to people how to live a healthier life as we also use to sell them products they do not need?

It is fair to ask if anyone benefited from the confusion over cholera. Frelimo accused Renamo of a campaign of disinformation, but the study finds no evidence for this. Renamo may have made some short term political capital over this, by underlining the weaknesses of the government health service in Nampula province. But Renamo could not offer the one thing that might have made a difference – local empowerment. Like Frelimo, it remains highly centralised and is unable to offer another model of development or distribution of power. Frelimo in its election campaign in 1999 promised to give the people a better future; Renamo claims it is failing to do so. But neither party is offering the poor the power to build their own better future. Perhaps they cannot; the international community is similarly unwilling to allow Mozambique the power to build a better future.

Forty years ago Frelimo showed that people could be mobilised around a promise of empowerment to improve their own lives. This study shows that today in Nampula, “people’s power” is not dead, but it is not constructive. In an increasingly globalised world with wealth and power concentrated in the hands of an ever smaller group, the bulk of the world becomes increasingly disempowered, and desperate attempts to regain at least a small amount of local power become more common. As in Nampula these attempts are often directed at outsiders and others who seem to represent outside power. The study warns that the fundamental distrust shown by the cholera protests means that there will be similar spontaneous violence in other areas. And that points to an underlying question – will these new outbursts of people’s power ever coalesce to challenge the rich and powerful in Maputo and Washington?

Joseph Hanlon