Viewpoint

What is development?

Hugo Slim

In hazarding a guess at what most of us in NGOs mean by development, I will try to sketch out the ideal as it has emerged in recent years and identify some of its essential ingredients. In so doing, I want to emphasise the following key principles:

• that genuine development is much more than a matter of economics and economic growth;
• that development is a universal goal for all societies and not just a ‘Third World problem’;
• that development depends on the just interaction between different groups and different nations, and that at the heart of the struggle for development is the struggle of relationships.

Having looked at the ideal of development and glimpsed a near-perfect world, I will then look briefly at the reality of the development agenda today, as it is domin-ated by the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’. Finally, in the light of this reality I want to suggest that the right role for NGOs is one which continues to question current orthodoxy and, where appropriate, to seek alternatives to it.

What is development trying to do?

In 1974, a group of ten of the world’s development experts (all men) met at Cocoyoc in Mexico to try to set a new agenda of ‘alternative development’, to move forward from what they considered to be the failure of development in the 1950s and 1960s. They produced the Cocoyoc Declaration, in which they made a basic distinction between priorities relating to the ‘inner limits’ and those relating to the ‘outer limits’ of development (Cocoyoc, 1974, pp.170-1).

The inner limits cover ‘fundamental human needs’ like food, shelter, health, and human rights. The outer limits relate to aspects of ‘the planet’s physical integrity’ like the environment and population. This distinction is still a useful one and identifies the two great concerns of development: human development and protection of the planet, and their inevitable inter-dependence.

Some basic ingredients

In recent decades, development theorists and practitioners have come to recognise that a certain number of basic ingredients are required, if effective development is to take place within each of these two spheres. Listing some of these ingredients may help to give a picture of what development is and how it comes about.

Development is essentially about change: not just any change, but a definite improvement — a change for the better. At the same time, development is also about continuity. Because if change is to take root, it must have something in common with the community or society in question. It must make sense to people and be in line with their values and their capacity. Development must therefore be appropriate — culturally, socially, economically, technologically, and environmentally.

But appropriate does not means old-fashioned. Genuine development has an air of originality about it, but it is original not just by virtue of being novel. In the strict sense of the word, genuine development is
original because it has its origins in that society or community, and is not simply an imported copy or imitation of somebody else’s development. It is well known that ‘imitative development’ is often doomed to failure. At best it does not take root; at worst it imposes itself and distorts or destroys a society. Genuine development, therefore, is not about similitude and making everything the same. Instead, real development safeguards and thrives on difference, and produces diversity.

At the heart of any change for the better are the twin ingredients of equity and justice. Change will not be an improvement if it is built on injustice and does not benefit people equally. A quest for justice and equity usually meets resistance from some quarters, and this means that struggle, opposition, and conflict of some kind are also essential ingredients of development. This is because relationships are a major factor in determining development. Relationships between individuals, communities, the sexes, the social classes, and power groups combine with international relationships to dictate the equity of development throughout the world. Effective development will inevitably challenge some of these relationships in the process of changing them.

Participation is a critical aspect of equity. If development is really to belong to people, it must be shared by them. This means involving them. It is now a well-known maxim that true development can be achieved only by people and cannot be done to people. Representation and involvement in decision-making, action, and outcome are therefore regarded as essential. Many development theorists use the word ‘democracy’ to describe this process. And the idea of empowerment is increasingly used to describe the fulfilment of a participatory process, the consequence of which is the achievement of other key development ingredients like choice, control, and access.

At the end of the day, development is judged as successful by whether or not it lasts. Sustainability, self-reliance, and independence are seen as vital ingredients in effective development: the eggs that bind the mixture of the cake. Sustainability is particularly important, because it guarantees a future for the improvements brought about by a community or society. Sustainability is therefore described as intergenerational equity, because the benefits of development will be equally available to future generations, and not all used up by the present generation. Effective development is about change for the better for future generations too, and not just at their expense.

If these are some of the ingredients of development, the oven in which they are all baked is time. Development takes time, and time is something of which Western culture in particular has very little. Most people agree that the pressure for quick results has been the cause of many of the world’s most inappropriate development initiatives. It is a pressure which stems from a widespread naivety in the world’s major development institutions over the last 50 years, a naivety founded on an over-confidence in technological and economic development, without sufficient regard for social and environmental realities.

Development is more than economics

Recognition of these various development ingredients has made it increasingly clear that there is more to human development than economic development. Real human development concerns more intangible factors that relate to the quality of change in people’s lives, as well as to the quantity of change. This view that human development is more complex than economics alone is clearly expressed by John Clark in his 1991 book Democratizing Development (p. 36):

Development is not a commodity to be weighed or measured by GNP statistics. It is a process of change that enables people to take charge of their own destinies and
realize their full potential. It requires building up in people the confidence, skills, assets and freedoms necessary to achieve this goal.

Economic growth is not a simple engine for human development. Development is not just about having more, but also about being more (Pratt and Boyden, 1985, p.13, CAFOD et al., 1987). It is about the development of the human person, of society, and of the environment. As a result, one of the major trends in recent development theory and practice has been the merging of the human rights and environment agendas with the development agenda. This merger recognises that development must be valued in terms beyond simple economic analysis, and that poverty is as much about a loss of rights, freedom, culture, dignity, and environment as about low income. In his 1992 book *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, John Friedman outlines a new responsible model of economic growth which takes human rights and the environment into account:

An appropriate economic growth path is pursued when market measures of production are supplemented with calculations of the probable social and environmental costs, or costs to third parties, that are likely to be incurred in any new investment.

The creation of UNDP’s human development index (HDI) in 1990 was a further bold attempt to recognise that human development is more than economics, and is about the quality of human life as well as the quantity of economic growth. This point is well made in UNDP’s 1993 *Human Development Report*:

There is no automatic link between income and human development. Several countries have done well in translating their income into the lives of their people: their human development rank is way ahead of their per capita income rank. Other societies have income ranks far above their human development rank, showing their enormous potential for improving the lives of their people.

The conclusion is that rich countries are not always the most developed, and poor countries are not always the least developed. Irresponsible economic growth — superdevelopment — can act as a force for underdevelopment in and against many societies. Civilisation (the old nineteenth-century word for development) is more than economic growth and is by no means a monopoly of the rich, but common to all societies.

A universal issue, not a ‘Third World’ issue

This de-linking of economic growth and human development brings the important realisation that human-development strategies are required in response as much to over-development and super-development as to under-development. The extreme urbanisation, pollution, environmental degradation, unfair trading practices, and economic expansionism in European, North American, and South-East Asian societies is as much a form and cause of mis-development as the hunger, conflict, and poverty in some African, Asian, and Latin American societies.

Every society — rich or poor — has a development problem, and the old development geography of north/south, east/west, and of first, second, third, and fourth worlds, misses the point that fair and sustainable development is a global issue. As John Friedman makes clear (1993, p. 131), human development is a question and a challenge for world society:

Rich and poor countries constitute a single world system, and the overdevelopment of the first is closely linked to the misdevelopment of the second. Neither ‘development’ is
sustainable in the long run; and both fail to meet the equity test. A vision of alternative development is thus as pertinent for the countries central to the world economy as it is for those on the periphery.

Development is about relationships

Human relationships are one of the main determinants of human development. A great deal of the world's misdevelopment is the result of unfair or dysfunctional relationships at an international, national, or community level. At national and community levels, power relations, gender relations, and ethnic relations play a major part in shaping or distorting genuine development. At an international level, unjust economic relations ensnare poor countries into debt and commodity-pricing traps, while political imbalances prevent many countries from enjoying a full stake in global governance. In this context, much of what is offered as development aid is in fact a catalyst of misdevelopment, either because it is environmentally or socially inappropriate, or because its 'giving' represents the extension of a dysfunctional power relationship between nations. Because of this, Pope Paul VI wisely urged poor countries to 'choose with care between the evil and the good in what is offered by the rich' (CAFOD, 1967). The dysfunctional way in which the 'First World' projects so much of the shadow side of its psyche on to images of a 'weak and helpless Third World' also places huge cross-cultural obstacles in the way of healthy and just relationships between peoples.

Just human relationships are therefore one of the keys to development, and dialogue needs to be at the heart of the development relationship to encourage exchange, agreement, and partnership. For NGOs and other development organisations in particular, this question of forming just relations is crucial. As Charles Abrams has observed, effective co-operation between development professionals and the communities with which they work depends on recognising a place for the 'expert' from outside the community alongside the 'inpert' from inside it, and achieving the right balance between the two (Abrams, 1964).

Measuring development

The fact that development is an issue for every society, and that it is as much about human rights, the environment, and relationships as it is about economics, makes it an increasingly complex phenomenon to measure. The last few years have seen an enormous effort to move beyond traditional economic indicators (of production, income, consumption, debt, etc.) epitomised by the World Bank's world-development indicators, to a new broad range of indicators which capture the personal, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of development.

Of this new generation of development indicators, the World Bank's programme of social indicators of development currently has 94 indicators and UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) has 253 human-development indicators (UNDP, 1993). These range from infant mortality rates to air quality, through human rights, to TV ownership and population per passenger car. The HDI also claims to be gender-sensitive.

It is hard to gauge the accuracy and relevance of new development indicators like the HDI, which the British newspaper the Daily Mail has described with typical tabloid precision as 'a happiness index'. However, they are at least evidence of the wider recognition that a purely economic model of development is not sufficient, and that in reality the quality and scope of development are more complex than wealth creation and distribution.

The reality of development today

Much of the above has described the ideal recipe for genuine development. In reality, however, the development menu today is dominated by one main dish, which is
known as 'the Washington Consensus', served up from the policy kitchens of the White House, the World Bank, and the IMF in Washington, and garnished with the policies of the European Union.

With the end of the Cold War, the Western economic and political view has come to dominate the global scene. From living in a bi-polar world which set out two main models of political and economic development, we currently exist in an essentially uni-polar world, where the tenets of Western liberalism go unchallenged and dictate international policy. For the most part, the world now tends towards this view, which is therefore regarded as a consensus. Its motto is 'good governance', which has both an economic and political aspect. Economic good governance refers to notions of free markets and a limited and enabling State. Political good governance is about human rights and the development of a vibrant society.

The Washington Consensus has much to commend it, and indeed co-opts a great deal of the language and ideas of previously progressive NGOs, especially relating to human rights, which somewhat takes the wind out of their sails as radical organisations. But in its ideals lie all the dangers of prescription and of a single model, because its whole platform hinges on the principle of conditionality. The Washington Consensus is a set menu, and it is now impossible for any aid-dependent country to order its development à la carte.

The set menu

The majority of Western aid is now conditional on the rigorous pursuance of good governance in its prescribed form. While there is little doubt that human rights are a given good and an ethical model to be applied across the world (although there is even some dispute about that), the same may not necessarily be the case for economic models and notions of the perfect State and society. For example, the enormous trust which the Washington Consensus places in civil society and a thriving NGO sector as a panacea for efficient service-provision may prove unfounded in the many different cultural and historical settings around the world. The informal voluntary sector is a peculiarly European (possibly even Anglo-Saxon) phenomenon which may not travel well.

There are, therefore, grave dangers in a single prevailing developmental model, particularly when — as is the case today — there is also a distinct lack of alternatives. The NGO sector, in particular, has always been the forum for opposition and alternative development strategies. Today it finds itself courted to an unprecedented degree by the establishment — often with echoes of its own words — and is in danger of being co-opted. But, as yet, it has no real alternatives to the Washington Consensus beyond a vague suspicion that the new blueprint of good governance cannot be any better than previous ones. This is not enough on which to make a stand, however, and in the meantime any debate about development seems to be suspended, with the argument temporarily won.

The case of Eastern Europe and the new States of the former Soviet Union adds a new financial urgency to the question. With Western aid budgets being reduced in real terms, it is alarming for development agencies concerned with Africa, Asia, and Latin America to see these dwindling budgets now being shared with the countries of Eastern Europe and the new independent States, especially when foreign policy is bound to dictate a priority for the former communist countries over and above other (most notably African) countries.

So what is development?

The first part of this article sketched out a relatively positive picture of what principles might be considered to contribute to genuine development. The ingredients it identified are complex and not easy to come by.
Among them, the principles of diversity and originality were identified as essential, but the prospect for these two ingredients in particular appears even more distant in the light of the development realpolitik described above. The prevailing consensus prizes uniformity and only really allows for one road towards a single and over-prescribed model of development. It is perhaps ironic that a consensus which champions choice and the market in its economics tends not to encourage a marketplace for developmental alternatives.

It seems fair to conclude that the main priority for the NGO community today is to continue to explore alternatives, and to question the current blueprint where it proves to be flawed, from the basis of experience and partnership. These alternatives should be used to influence and challenge current trends and, if not to change the model, at least to shape the best possible variations. Genuine universal development is indeed an ideal, a holy grail. But, as a general rule, it may be more creative to have several knights errant roaming the world in search of it in different ways and different places, instead of one white knight leading the whole band in one direction, in the belief that he knows where it is hidden.

Notes

This article is based on a Discussion Paper prepared for a Save the Children UK regional meeting in Thailand in December 1993. I am indebted to Douglas Lackey of SCF for setting me such a direct question as the subject of my session — a question that I had been happily dodging to date.

References

CAFOD (1967) This is Progress, translation of the Encyclical Letter of Paul VI — Populorum Progressio, paragraph 41, London: CAFOD.

The author

Hugo Slim is co-director of the Complex Emergencies Programme at the Centre for Development and Emergency Planning (CENDEP), Oxford Brookes University. Previously he was Senior Research Officer at Save the Children Fund, and has also worked in Morocco, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Occupied Territories. His address for correspondence is: CENDEP, Oxford Brookes University, Gypsy Lane, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK. Fax: +44 1865 483298.