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Editorial

Utopias capable of saving humanity

Is it not too late to make some adjustments concerning global development now that the 'emerging' Chinese giant is forcing its way down the road of economical growth at whatever cost? The text that we have put forward here says no. This no is justified in three ways by Paul Caspersz¹, Jesuit priest from Sri Lanka: no because focusing oneself on profits is a negation of the human being and its community, no because the exacerbated materialism will never be able to replace spirituality as a social pivot and no because this frantic consumption of natural resources endangers our own survival.

This triple no is utopian. And that gives it its strength. As the author affirms from the start, to achieve a fair reflection on development it is necessary to liberate oneself from the caste of specialists, technocrats, bankers and other top civil servants and beg to differ. His reference is, of course, Mahatma Gandhi. The strength of this contribution is that it leads to, besides a reflection, other approaches that need to be studied such as the local initiatives taken in Sri Lanka to fight against hunger or to spread education at the grassroots', in the villages and peasant communities.

This triple no has also got a saving character. We see everyday or nearly everyday, plagues reoccurring whereas economic growth was supposed to end them. I am thinking of the threat on the world food supply created by the taking off of prices of commodities. I am thinking of climatic insecurity which is weighing on the heads of millions of people in flood risk areas in deltas or islands, in Bangladesh, the Maldives and in the Pacific Ocean. These threats show that humanity is already destroying a part of itself. Although figures always provide excuses and nuances for the experts of development, this sacrifice of some for the prosperity of others, is in fact, the beginning of the negation of the human being.

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A new fight for development

The key concept of development has become a mirage. Interpreted by international organisms in the light of market regulation, it confuses indispensable society evolution and infrastructure improvement with the seeking of a frantic economic growth. Development is no longer the development of the whole person and every person advocated by, amongst others, Louis-Joseph Lebret, but an illusion capable of fatal consequences. How do we remedy this? And above all, how do we not abdicate the claim of an other development? Paul Caspersz¹ attempts to answer this.

By Paul Caspersz¹

There is a need for a clear and correct concept of development and a clear and correct understanding of the process of development. The dominant concept which touted in the 1990s all over the world by the World Bank and the IMF is the one of economic growth. These institutions have incited, often with success, the political and social elites of the third world, and even numerous associations and militants, to adopt this concept and to stick by it.

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The problem is that the meaning of development has lost its essential sense. When the same name is used so often and over so long periods of time by so many people in so many places, it is too easily assumed that the word is understood correctly. Actually, however, this is far from being the case. The assumption that everyone knows what true development is about is gratuitous and incorrect.

Emancipation from the caste of specialists.

Therefore, the first thing that must be done is to find a new term or a new expression to redefine this tarnished concept. To do so, it is necessary to have the courage of emancipating oneself from the language used by the caste of occidental specialists in social sciences. The objective of many western development theoreticians seems to be to write not in such a way that the people may understand but that their colleagues are pleased not to understand. The first step to do to save this concept is to break up with these specialists' way of writing and to decide to be "outside the caste".

Once this step has been made, we must then have the courage to name what contaminates the now widespread concept of "development". The poisoned core is money, the enthronement of money in the concept of economic growth, the centrality of money in the unending production of goods and services, its accumulation and its inherently unequal distribution.

The rescue operation consists of excising this core and installing in its place that which we believe to be the centre of all genuine development: the human person in community. Great caution is necessary because money, capital and economic growth – all interconnected – remain for the free market advocates the centre and the goal of development. Even worse, it is in the name of the defence of the human person in that they do not brook any intrusion of the State in economics affairs. Therefore they refuse minimum wages, State recognition of workers' unions...Their theory of development wants each human person to be free to sink or swim unaided in the economic sea, to buffet all alone the waves of supply and demand as they rise and fall. The "free" market allows the lucky transition from rags to riches. They call this the invisible hand of supply and demand, forgetting that the invisible hand often works by strangulation.

At the centre of real development there is and there has to be, the human person in community. Outside the community the human person has no independent existence. That person's destiny is entwined with the destiny of the community from conception to birth and through all the stages of life. Lets take for example Sri Lanka. An officer of the World Bank in Colombo agreed to meet a group of voluntary social activists whom he knew to be very critical of the World Bank. It expressed its profound dissatisfaction with the concept of development and suggested an alternative. Hereafter are the main ideas.

Food and health care: taking into account the real needs

The needs that must be taken into account, for development worthy of the name, are the needs of the poor. The scheme of subsidizing and controlling the price of the basic food items, flour and sugar and subsidizing their purchase to the consumer began in Sri Lanka in December 1941. With several modifications but always with the idea that it belonged to the State to make sure that no one went hungry, the scheme was continued until 1977 when it was finally abandoned. In its place a poorly administered food and kerosene stamps scheme was introduced for the poor in 1977 and highly criticized. According to its detractors, this scheme has been an economic heresy, financially unstable and a mad gambit of populist politicians. They pour scorn on the idea that it is the duty of a Buddhist ruler to see that no one in the kingdom should starve.

There is no denying that the scheme could have been improved in such a way not to provide the rich with free rice to feed their dogs. But it has kept the wolf of starvation from the door of very poor families in our island.

In the third world hospitals there is an insufficient number of beds and patients have to sleep under the beds which are occupied or outside the wards or on mats spread out on the verandahs, sometimes next to drains or bins. The first task of the health services is to provide beds for all. If there is an insufficient number of sheets and pillow cases, and even after surgery patients are put on stained mattresses and soiled pillows, the first task of development is to provide an abundant supply of clean sheets and pillow cases.

Only a few months before his assassination in 1948 Mahatma Gandhi proposed a criterion:

"whenever you are in doubt, or when your self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and the spiritually starved millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.89*).

These are the types of priorities for which we must have the courage to defend.

The poor must not be on the outskirts of development.

All development should therefore be geared to the goal of humanization of human life. Development that fosters the acquisitive spirit for its own sake, consumerism, elitism, social and economic inequality is therefore anti-development. People have to have more only in order to be more, not for themselves in isolation but in the human community. Humanisation is this "being more". All persons on this planet must live lives that are fully human: eat, drink, sleep, give and receive love, experience joy and sorrow according to his needs. When in Sri Lanka an estate worker family of mother, father, dependents children unmarried and newly married, have to live, eat, sleep and procreate in one room of 10x12 feet, with 4x2 feet screened off with old sarees for the newly married couple, the situation can only be called inhuman.

No one in the world should be hungry, thirsty, homeless, unloving and unloved. Humanizing development means putting the poor at the centre of the concept, and this is what the World Bank has not understood, for them the "safety net" takes in those who are the equity casualties of economic growth. But the poor are not at the centre of the concept. The poor ought to retort, we do not want to be caught in your net; we want justice which will make your nets unnecessary.

If development is humanization, it is easily understood, in the third world especially, that development is above all liberation – liberation from everything that is dehumanizing. Humanization is impossible without liberation.

The opposite of the liberation process is the process of alienation, which is the inevitable result of the capitalist mode of "development". However, it must be freely acknowledged that capitalism itself played a liberative role in securing the release of humankind from the chains that bound it in the pre-industrial, feudal era of history. In that era there was very imperfect and often even completely erroneous understanding of the forces of nature. Human was submitted to the forces of nature and could do little or nothing to bring those forces under human control. Both Church and State taught that the order of society was divinely established and it would be wrong and, in any case, futile to seek to change it. Capitalism changed all that and made the human fully responsible for his destiny. But in so doing it brought in new forms of alienation, more ferocious than those of pre-industrial feudalism. These are the ones we must fight.

The imperative of change may be the result of correct social analysis or of greater awareness of one's rights and the injustice of one's existing situation. This may arise from a radical interpretation of religion. Change may also result from revolution. Revolution need not necessarily be violent, but violent revolution cannot be ruled out on principle, since the opposite of love is not violent revolution, but hate.

The ultimate goal of development activities is not what most donor agencies require. It is the welfare of the human community or humanization. Pre-primary schools on plantation, vocational programmes for the poor, housing schemes with and for the disadvantaged should be considered successful not because they attain their immediate, apparent and measurable objective but only to the extent that they lead to greater happiness. If the ultimate goal is not pursued with deliberation and intensity, the development activity will not merely be neutral with regard to humanization in community. It will be actually negative in that regard.

This is not easy, failures are possible. The people may have succeeded in building only fifty of the seventy houses targeted. A poultry project formulated by a social action group in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in such a way as to bring two violence-prone ethnic groups together may be a disastrous failure in the matter of cost recovery or egg-production but if the people building the houses have grown in self-

confidence and self dignity, if the poultry farmers have learned to work together, to talk and laugh together, to live with one another and to trust one another, the project will have been socially successful.

Back to Gandhi's precepts

Genuine development is spiritual. Once again, Gandhi is invaluable:

“ Western civilization is material, frankly material. It measures progress by the progress of matter [...]. No one says, ‘Now the people are more truthful or more humble’. I judge it by my own test and I use the word ‘Satanic’ in describing it. You set such store by the temporal, external things. The essential of Eastern civilization is that it is spiritual, immaterial.[...]. Your idea is the more you want the better you are, and you don’t fall far short in your belief.” (ibid., Vol. 48)

The spiritual dimension of development should give direction to, permeate and inform from within, all the other dimensions or aspects of development. It is the dimension which produces poets and philosophers, musicians and artists. It makes human beings capable of love and hate, of passionate devotion to another person or to a cause. It is the dimension that makes the human being break the confines of the merely visible and tangible and reach out to the deeper meaning of human life. It is the dimension that makes the human being human.

The spiritual dimension is not the religious dimension, though it may include the religious dimension. I distinctly remember the day in the early 1980’s when I was visiting families in Jaffna which had suffered from the repression of the State forces in the context of the demand of the Tamil people for their human rights. I was accompanying a Sinhalese Marxist friend. We were returning from a visit to an affected family. We were both saddened by what we had seen, and we were weary in mind and body. Breaking the silence, I asked my friend, ‘Why are we doing all this, with so little hope of success? Why are we taking all these risks? Why do we go from house to house to take note of what these people have endured?’ My friend replied: ‘Because we are human and they are human’.

We must seek social peace and harmony

There can be no doubt whatsoever that economic well-being is crucial. It is both good in itself and necessary for a full human life. Economic well-being means, above all else, the fulfilment of basic human needs. The people need good, nutritious food or what in nutritious science is called a balanced diet, balanced in terms of carbohydrates, proteins, minerals and essential fats. They need sufficient clothes, not only to cover nakedness, but also for regular change of clothes. They need an adequate shelter: a home or even a hut.

I know of at least one social worker that held that housing should be given priority even over food and clothes. Give a family a decent house, he said, and the family will see that in the house there will be sufficient food and clothing. This has been experienced by Satyodaya, a social action organisation in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in its housing scheme for seventy displaced estates families. Essential to development are also health care and the schooling of children. Essential also is a physical and social environment conducive to the socialization of people in the community. None of this should be ignored, still less denied.

To do so, the energies must be released. The ‘genius of the poor’ comes from their energies of creativity and endurance. These energies are both moral and physical, but more moral than physical. Moral energy springs up and is promoted by the thought that one’s work is one’s own, that one’s work is not commandeered by another, for the benefit of the others. So also, in true development should the product of human labour bear the imprint of the one who produced it. Hence it is not difficult to see how much more true development there is for the worker who builds and repairs a small reservoir of water which goes to irrigate the fields of the village than if the worker does one monotonous job the whole day to construct a dam or hydro-electric station. The latter is done wearily, grudgingly, only because it earns a wage, the former since it means life for the worker and his family, for relation and friend, is done joyously and is self-fulfilling.

This does not mean that the gigantic dam or hydro-electric project should not be constructed. It only means that the developmentalists must establish priorities and know what allows more for the release of the moral and physical energies of a people.

And finally, development must not endanger the future. It is Achilles' heel of western development. By ruining the environment, alarmingly depleting non-renewable resources, polluting the atmosphere, and especially preying on the labour and the markets of the vast populations of the poor and underdeveloped countries. All this will finally receive the ultimate proof of unsustainability: the black, the yellow and the coloured races of the third world will rise up one day and say: Enough! And that may happen sooner than what is expected.

Counter-point

Who decides? And why?

Noticing that corruption and misappropriation only benefits to the most crafty people, to ensure the success of development programmes, the public and private financiers promote the concept of "good governance". But, on this subject, the experiments have not led to a magic formula which if applied everywhere would improve everyone's life. As well, in a competitive world with no limits, it can be feared that there will always be winners and losers.

How can we make sure that other paradigms, other values (or just simply other view points), caused by a world full of diversity, can be taken into account? In fact, ignoring the differences, the histories, the complementarities, the rhythms, could lead to a proposition, even to an imposition, of a set of values, forcing without claiming it directly, a standardisation, which shares similarities with colonialism.

If equality is a universal right and development not a question of luck, the "genius of the poor that comes from their creative and enduring energy" cannot be set aside any longer.

In the development process, it matters to know who are the decision makers. Those who finance and administer the help? The experts and the consultants? What importance is given to the 'subjects' of development? Are they only a foil for a policy, to collect money and satisfy consciences? Do we leave them the possibility to start, experiment, make mistakes and draw lessons from failures, for themselves and for others?

Shouldn't they be the ones taking the decisions in the first place?

After all, it concerns their future: why should they not have a predominant voice in the determination of policies addressed to them?

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