

Summer Institute of Linguistics

International Conference on Development Issues

Dallas, USA: 4 - 8 May 1992

Potential through relationships: a view of development

Clinton Robinson

1. The debate continues...

Development is a notoriously elusive concept whose definition frequently reveals as much about the values of the writer as about the dimensions of the problem. What follows will be no exception! For the development practitioner at grassroots level, what works and meets visible needs may be in the foreground, while the planner and academic is interested in straightening out the underlying concepts. This paper seeks to debate some of the concepts and ideas which might provide a basis for action. It is essential that practitioners in the field are conscious of the basis of their actions and are able to articulate it to others. Anyone serious about the challenge of the human condition, in its tangible and intangible aspects, must make the effort to reconceptualise for themselves what development means. Such an effort will have been worth it if the resulting vision impels us to confront the personal and corporate challenge of the need of others. Such a challenge will be filled with uncomfortable ambiguities and uncertainties - questions we will never be able quite fully to answer.

What is on offer here, then, is a view of development, a contribution to the debate which you will take further with the input of your own views and experiences. An attempt will be made to ask what principles might underlie development 'activities', with the risk that the notion of development as such loses its specific 'third-world' connotations - but then all human beings everywhere start life by facing similar needs, though different problems in meeting them. Such problems arise in a world where opportunity and choice are not apportioned equally, and so the principles will be applied to that context.

Even where our concern is for local communities, and the relationships within and between such communities, it is impossible, in any discussion of development, to avoid the political context of the relations within and between nation-states. Such political issues are not the focus of this paper, but lie very close to the surface of the debate. However, it needs to be said that it is not my intention to propose or espouse any particular political ideology, either in the analysis of the problems or in the search for solutions. As already confessed, such a paper necessarily reveals value preferences of the writer!

In general terms, development is often thought of as an improvement in the quality of life. In this respect I would like to quote Jesus Christ, where he speaks of obtaining and living life in all its fullness: "I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness." (John 10:10). Christ was making the point that in the divine economy human life is to be lived to the full, individually and in community. The gospel of Christ affirms human life and promises new dimensions of fullness. The very formulation of this offer is an indication of the way to such fullness of life. In the passage quoted, and in the surrounding context, the kind of life he was offering was based on a relationship with himself, not on a scheme of behaviour or economic restructuring or cultural identity - those things would find their place in the relationship. This spiritual relationship will manifest itself in the kind of

relationships with others which Christ displayed as he brought life in all its fullness to those he related to.

The central theme of this paper will be that the goals and the means of development must be sought in the quality of relationships between people. I will therefore suggest certain basic qualities which underlie development-promoting relationships, examine the kind of development which might result and ask what the implications of such an approach might be.

2. Building relationships

I am suggesting here that the building of relationships of a certain quality is the means by which the process of development is pursued. It is important that development is understood as a process and not as a set of products, outcomes or projects. Process implies an ongoing and open-ended nature, where the means are as important as the goal. It is clear both conceptually and in our experience that development cannot be defined as a certain specified level to be attained - of socioeconomic status, educational achievement, material well-being and so on.

The notion of development, in all but its most blatantly Westernising and modernising forms, has given prominence to the need for new kinds of relationships. Attention has frequently been drawn to the need to restructure radically the relationship between the North and the South and to examine closely relationships between élites and rural populations within countries. At the international level the debate quickly moves into technical areas of North/South flows, debt reduction, investment and so on (cf. Urquidi 1988). Important though such issues are, they mask a basic unwillingness to re-align the relationship. This is too threatening to the North and challenges developing country élites whose status and power are dependent on the international status quo. As Masse (1991) argues, it is unrealistic to expect the massive transfer of resources from North to South which such a restructured relationship would require.

Ultimately, a concern to promote equitable, respectful and servant relationships challenges us all personally, and this may be another reason why the question is avoided. Only when we are personally secure enough to let go of 'our share' can such relationships grow. Outside of practical trust in God such security is hardly to be found, which again questions the spiritual foundations of development.

Communicating a vision

The centrality of relationships implies a key role for communication. In the development process face-to-face interaction is the most important kind of communication since it will be there that the quality of relationships is built and demonstrated (Childers 1990). The commitment to build relationships will, in fact, be seen in the determination to pursue dialogue even when there are disagreements and apparently irreconcilable positions represented.

Development communication has frequently given major attention to the transmission of information which is deemed necessary to a community - often in the opinion of outsiders rather than of the people themselves. However, what is perhaps more necessary is the articulation of a vision of what the development process is about. Tasks are set in the context of a larger programme and the programme is based on a vision of the way human beings are, the way things should be:

Development is much more than mere mechanistic drudgery. (...)

Robinson: *Potential through relationships*

Truly realistic planning for the future does not, unimaginatively, combine the possible with the real ("data", "given" - by whom? -). It combines the desirable with the possible. The objective must always be desirable, though perhaps impossible in today's estimation, but possible at a future stage. Truly realistic planning does not start from the bland "given" but starting from what is both desirable and possible it comes back to present reality. (Carmen 1991:75)

Development intervention, including SIL work, has far too often concentrated on providing certain products (including training) without passing on the underlying vision. New skills and enhanced capacity will only be used where there is the motivation to do so and the belief that the result will be worthwhile in the community's own terms. This is not to downgrade the importance of building capacity, but the larger context will determine its use and usefulness.

Specifically, the foundations of SIL's vision must be passed on - some communities will embrace and adapt them, others may reject them, but at least they will have understood and made a choice for themselves. Important aspects of the vision are the priority of man's relationship with God and with each other, the centrality of culture and language in life, the rich potential of people made in God's image, the absolute need to act in love (equity, respect, service....).

Vision must be debated and re-debated. The notion of what development is and what a community is aiming for must become part of the local development dialogue. Foundational ideas must be made explicit and be consciously debated. They must also be modelled, and the modelling itself debated so that lessons can be learned on all sides - by the community and by the change agent. Such reflection on the underlying vision will lead to repeated reformulation of the vision - a self-sustaining process which alone will sustain a community's commitment to positive change.

I will now examine three fundamental qualities which need to characterise relationships in the development process. These qualities should be found in all relationships, from those within family units to those obtaining between nations. Most crucially, they must obtain between those individuals and groups, from North and South, who interact in the search for ways to redress the imbalance of opportunity. However, the three qualities - equity, respect and service - are, of course, necessary components of any relationship.

Relationships of equity

No relationship is totally equitable - even on a personal level. Differentials of all kinds exist between individuals as well as between communities and nations. Access to resources, social and economic status, political power, military muscle - all contribute to inequity. In development circles, the comparative table of GNP is often quoted as the demonstration of inequity between nations, and so the need for equity is seen as a central challenge of development (H.R.H. Prince Claus 1991).

Similar calls for more equitable relationships are heard repeatedly from political leaders and development thinkers (Chidzero 1991; Brundtland 1991; Wignaraja 1991). Beyond such agreement on the importance of greater equity is the need for personal commitment which seeks to restore equity by tipping the balance in favour of the South. Only a personal and corporate commitment in the North to give up being 'more equal than others' will have any effect. The

challenge in the process of development is to seek greater equity for disadvantaged communities while at the same time maintaining equity within the community and with other communities. Otherwise, development intervention, specially any input of resources, can lead to further inequities. Developing relationships of equity is not a call for political revolution where power simply changes hands; it is a challenge to avoid the indignity of one-sided domination in relationships, whether such domination be economic, technological or political.

Relationships of respect

Respect in relationships goes beyond politeness and an absence of disdain. It involves a desire to know and appreciate who the other is and what their concerns are. In terms of development intervention, this means a respect for the identity of the disadvantaged group and a concern that this identity be upheld in the process of change. Maiava (1988) shows how two prevalent development models - modernisation and dependency - have given scant attention to cultural issues; she calls for respect for development goals which are defined according to local cultural norms:

The motivation to develop must have its roots in culture. (...) Each culture has its own rationality because each has its own ideals. And therefore each culture has its own conception of and reasons for development. (Maiava 1988:71)

Such a view puts communities and nations of the 'developing' world in a position to refuse the kind of development coming from the North and West. Salim (1991) also called for a different course of development than that pursued by the industrialised countries. Such options will only be possible where there is genuine respect for other ways of doing things and for local knowledge. This would undoubtedly call for a 'reversal' (Chambers 1983) of the domination of the criterion of technological and economic efficiency.

A respectful attitude is slow to speak and, when it does so, asks how far a new idea might fit the local context; it then waits for the response, accepts it, learns and continues the dialogue. Much advice and 'help', such as structural adjustment programmes for instance, seem to be the very antithesis of such respect.

Relationships of service

The notion of service - or perhaps better an attitude of servanthood - makes the link between the abstract concepts of equity and respect and the tangible and intangible needs of 'developing' communities. A servant's role is to ask how they may be involved in helping meet someone else's priorities. This is a hard one for the West to swallow since it has so long cast itself in the role of the one who provides, who decides and who plans the way ahead. However, only a servant stance will convince the developing world that the West is serious about helping rather than promoting self-interest. A servant role is implicit in much of the literature on the characteristics of animators and facilitators, though the notion of a servant is too radical to be named or expounded as such.

Where a change agent or agency approaches the development needs of a community in a spirit of service, the agenda will be defined and owned by the community and external input will be on the basis of negotiation and mutual influence. This leaves room for exogenously conceived schemes only insofar as they have become part of the community's own agenda. It also means that the personal

agenda of the change agent is subject to review and adjustment through interaction with the community.

3. 'Life in all its fullness'

This phrase might well qualify as the best expression of the finality of the development process! Something of what the phrase means must include the rediscovery and realisation of the potential of people made in the image of God. Such a goal is ultimately a process, and it is not peculiar to the so-called Third World. However, where opportunity and choice are restricted, a great deal of human potential is latent. Enlarging choice in such communities implies giving attention to three major areas: building self-confidence, building capacity and building integration.

It needs to be emphasised, before we go on, that the notion of realising potential applies both to individuals and to communities. It may apply at any level of social organisation, and all levels need to be addressed in the development process. Immediately, the central importance of relationships resurfaces, since it is only in the context of a certain quality of relationship that the potential of separate individuals and communities can be realised without conflict and domination.

It is self-evident that realising hitherto latent potential involves change. Such change manifests itself both internally (in the individual or community) and externally, i.e. in relationships. At the social level, certain relationships which maintain disadvantage need therefore to be questioned, whether at community, national or international level. Change may also be necessary in the attitudes of members of different groups towards each other.

Building self-confidence

Much discussion of social change focusses today on the participation of the target group themselves in forging change. Their empowerment to effect change in their own lives and in exploitative social structures is the goal. Part of this empowerment is the building of self-confidence. Where years of oppression have kept a community in thrall to more powerful groups, people no longer believe that their actions will effect any change; initiative is abandoned and a sense of overwhelming fate prevails. In addition, cultural domination may have diminished the group's sense of identity and cohesion. Their traditional culture may not be able to withstand the onslaught of pre-packaged Western media, thus eroding the value of what the community has passed on for generations.

Building self-confidence in such circumstances will mean that local people take decisions affecting their own development and that only such initiatives that are decided in this way will be pursued. This requires sensitivity and humility on the part of the change agent, with a willingness to change goals and priorities as the community increasingly expresses itself. The aim will not merely be to meet certain needs in the village, but rather to use any felt need (water, agriculture, literacy, ...) to build initiative.

Cultural rehabilitation will also be part of building self-confidence. This does not mean developing a fortress mentality against foreign penetration, but a positive promotion of local culture in ways that underline the values on which the community is traditionally founded. Such promotion enables a creative confrontation with external values, rather than immediate capitulation to them. Cultures are constantly in a living dynamic relationship with each other; cultural preservation for its own sake is not in focus here - museum status is

as of little value as the unquestioning absorption of another culture. However, people can only choose what is best from other cultures if they are secure in their own (Tevoedjre 1990).

Building capacity

Many rural communities are caught in what Chambers (1983) calls the 'deprivation trap'. He identifies five mutually reinforcing factors which keep people in the vicious circle of poverty: powerlessness, vulnerability, physical weakness, poverty, isolation. To climb out of the trap requires, among other things, an increased capacity to initiate and sustain change. Such increased capacity may be represented by individual skills which are, nevertheless, used in the service of the whole community.

Building capacity is essentially an educational process which addresses the need of the community to take responsibility for setting its own development agenda. Tilakaratna calls this process 'capacitation' and sees it as consisting of three inter-related actions:

- a) development of intellectual skills and a knowledge base;
 - b) development of capacities for self-organisation and management of development actions;
 - c) gaining access to material resources to develop the productive base.
- (Tilakaratna 1987:23)

This educational process is central to giving groups "the abilities and skills to negotiate their own development" (Oakley 1991:186). Indeed Carmen (1991) makes such a process synonymous with development because it permits human creativity to open up new and imaginative vistas of the future. The articulation of a vision and the capacity to undertake the first steps towards it are in themselves the beginning of the realisation of people's potential.

It is helpful to see the contribution of SIL's literacy work in this light, recognising, however, that it is not the skill of reading and writing which is important in itself, but the use to which such skills are put.

Building integration

The kind of development which the West has exported for 50 years has been overwhelmingly material. Whether through industrialisation, CD, basic needs approach or participation, most development activity has majored on improving provision of material resources or access to them.

Most official international assistance is driven by a growth-centred development vision: with an underlying premise that the central task is to increase economic output. (Korten, 1991:87)

So-called 'integrated' projects have sought to promote the provision of different kinds of resources in a coordinated way, but have hardly gone beyond the material. Such an emphasis on an economic approach has often produced dislocation in other aspects of a community's life. What I mean here by building integration is the fostering of a development process which takes account of the different aspects of people's lives in a balanced way. When social, cultural, spiritual and economic factors are integrated together in development planning, the opportunities for enabling the realisation of people's potential will be increased.

Examples of large infrastructural projects are not hard to find where the overriding national economic interest has had adverse social effects - displacing populations, removing or changing traditional roles and occupations. Porter sees a link between concentration on economic development and the lack of local capacity:

...conventional growth-orientated economic development has led to a downgrading of the value of human development i.e. the development of the capacities of people and nationals to control their own lives and destinies. (Porter 1991:78)

While the cultural basis of development is recognised increasingly by recent writers (de Reyna 1990; Maiava 1988; South Commission 1990), it is hardly taken into consideration in project planning. Years of what de Reyna calls 'paneconomism' have made cultural factors subordinate to production and resource generation and management. In Africa for instance, educational systems, where cultural values ought to find their place, have often communicated a disrespectful neglect for local culture, language and values, engendering alienated identity in the rising generations.

Similar remarks can be made with regard to spiritual values, ignored in the 'paneconomistic' scheme of things. Calls for a new ethical system to underpin development and for the spiritual re-awakening which that requires came from only one speaker at a recent development conference (Salim 1991). The problem here is that as long as economic power is wielded and obeyed, no space is created for spiritual values to find expression in development plans.

Such an economically dominated development paradigm works against an integrated approach to the promotion of people's potential. It has never been satisfying to human beings to devote themselves entirely to the material, as the social problems of the West amply demonstrate. Human potential, in individuals and in communities, encompasses the social, the cultural and the spiritual and it is these values which give meaning to the material, rather than the other way round. There is a need therefore to understand better how spiritual, cultural and social values can be fostered in order to provide a solid foundation in the social fabric for initiating and sustaining change.

4. So get development out of a box!

All of the foregoing applies in any context of relationships, not only to the developed/underdeveloped context. Does this mean that the notion of development itself has no significance? No, rather it means that the development process cannot be confined to what are traditionally understood as development activities or projects. Indeed, this view puts such activities in the broader context of relationships and of building people's potential. In this way, where these goals are in focus, any activity or context - any purposeful interaction between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' at any level - can be seen as development. Hence development cannot be reduced to a well-defined set of needs or projects; it cannot be bolted on as a desirable (or undesirable!) component within another programme; it cannot be put in a box, but becomes a framework.

As a framework, it affects both the activity which a change agent (such as a language development worker) may be involved in and the orientation of tasks to be carried out.

Change agent activity

In the light of the process of development which has been introduced here, the interaction of the change agent with the community will be as important as the work she does. This may mean that a significant time is spent in a community building relationships before any work is undertaken. Such time will be used for learning the local language, understanding and adapting to the culture and discovering the dynamics of local relational patterns and priorities. Those very activities contribute to redressing the development imbalance by sending the message that the rich and powerful - whom change agents, both local and expatriate, usually represent - can become learners and servants.

SIL, like any NGO, undertakes a number of interrelated activities - in this case technical work, research, publication, training. All of these activities can be seen as development insofar as they build relationships and the potential of the community. Specifically, much of SIL's work in developing the local language and publishing locally written material promotes the cultural identity of the community, enabling members of it to take a renewed pride in their cultural heritage, history and ancestral knowledge.

Local-language literacy activities provide the community with tools to express themselves and to engage in a wider educational process once the language barrier is removed - women are often the last to learn other languages and so benefit from greater opportunity for education. Training in literacy, language development and translation develops technical, managerial and innovative capacity, and this can be channelled through local organisations such as a language committee. The promotion of such locally based structures is itself development as it increases the possibility of joint action in setting the development agenda. Thus the development process becomes the framework for each aspect of SIL intervention and gives it wider significance for promoting potential in the community.

Subordinate tasks to relationships

Where a large and long-term technical programme is undertaken, such as language development, literacy and translation, there are myriad tasks and sub-tasks to be tackled. The way such tasks are conceived is important if they are to promote the kind of development advocated here. There is a tendency for those schooled in Western-oriented educational systems to put emphasis on the mechanics of accomplishing a task, with attention to the most efficient means of doing so. This tendency can lead to a check-list approach to a large programme where progress is measured largely or wholly in the number of tasks which can be checked off.

If development is basically about building people, then clearly the accomplishment of tasks must be set in that context. Where matters like the nature, content and duration of development activity dominate discussion, the focus on building people is quickly lost. The accomplishment of specific tasks is not abandoned, but will be determined and constantly re-evaluated in the light of questions such as:

First of all, how far is the task part of locally perceived priorities?

How can this task be organised so as to involve the maximum number of people?

What new capacity will the community possess by undertaking this task?

Robinson: *Potential through relationships*

What decision-making processes can be instituted so that maximum local ownership of the activity is achieved?

How far is the doing of the task and its consequences likely to facilitate better relationships in the community? with other communities? with the change agent?

These and other questions will be asked by the change agent and the community together - just asking them may result in revised priorities or time-scales, and may reveal undiscovered or unexpressed potential in the community.

5. Conclusion

Discussion of development often moves quickly to the level of activities and projects, out of a genuine concern to ensure practical and appropriate assistance in a community. What I have suggested here is that the development process must above all be related to the promotion of people's potential, in an integrated way, building self-confidence and capacity. I have suggested that the means of achieving this is through building relationships of a certain quality at all levels of social life. The fundamental characteristics are such relationships of equity, respect and servanthood.

In conclusion, then, I offer an encapsulation of the development process, acknowledging the help of the South Commission (1990) in its formulation: development may be seen as a process of working with people to realise their God-given potential through the building of equitable, respectful and servant relationships. When both community and change agent live such a process in the light of their relationship to God, life takes on some of the fullness of which Christ spoke.

REFERENCES

- BRUNDTLAND, Gro H., 1991, "The global transition - outlook for the 1990s." Paper presented to the 20th. World Conference of the Society for International Development. Amsterdam, 6-9 May, 1991.
- CARMEN, R.E., 1991, "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Gained - Self-Reliance in the Post-Developmentalist Nineties. In *Development* 1991:4:67-76.
- CHAMBERS, Robert, 1983. *Rural Development - Putting the Last First*. Harlow: Longman.
- CHIDZERO, B.T.G., 1991, "The changing global economy and political order: regional perspectives on the new interdependence." Paper presented to the 20th. World Conference of the Society for International Development. Amsterdam, 6-9 May, 1991.
- CHILDERS, Erskine, 1990, "Communication in popular participation: empowering people for their own development." Paper presented at the International Conference on Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa, 12-16 February 1990, Arusha.
- HENRY, Paul M. (ed), 1990, *Pauvreté, Progrès et Développement*. Paris: Harmattan/UNESCO.
- H.R.H. Prince Claus of the Netherlands, 1991, "One World or Several or One World and Many." Paper presented to the 20th. World Conference of the Society for International Development. Amsterdam, 6-9 May, 1991.
- KORTEN, David C., 1991, "International Assistance - a Problem posing as a Solution." In *Development* 1991:4:87-94.

- MAIAVA, Susan L., 1988, *The Third Paradigm: Culture and Development*. Reading University (Agricultural Extension and Rural Development Centre: MA dissertation).
- MASSE, Marcel, 1991, "Sustainable development: fragments of a strategy." In ASHOK BAPNA (ed), 1991, *One World or Several*. Jaipur: SID Rajasthan Chapter. pp.91-97.
- OAKLEY, Peter (ed), 1991, *Projects with People: the practice of participation in rural development*. Geneva: ILO.
- PORTER, George, 1991, "UNCED and Economic Systems Reform." In *Development* 1991:4:77-82.
- de REYNA, Alberto, 1990, "Progrès et pauvreté et leurs relations avec les valeurs culturelles et spirituelles." In HENRY, P.M. (ed), 1990:61-84.
- SALIM, Emil, 1991, "Towards a sustainable future". Paper presented to the 20th. World Conference of the Society for International Development. Amsterdam, 6-9 May, 1991.
- South Commission, 1990, *The Challenge to the South: The Report of the South Commission*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- TEVOEDJRE, Albert, 1990, "Pauvreté, progrès et culture dans le contexte de l'Afrique et dans la perspective du développement endogène et centré sur l'homme". In HENRY, P.M. (ed), 1990:245-253.
- TILAKARATNA, S., 1987, *The Animator in Participatory Rural Development (Concept and Practice)*. Geneva: ILO.
- URQUIDI, Victor L., 1988, "Ideal and attainable goals for development." In UNESCO, 1988, *Goals of development*. Paris: UNESCO. pp.85-101.
- WIGNARAJA, Ponna, 1991, "Participatory development, growth and equity: no trade-offs." Paper presented to the 20th. World Conference of the Society for International Development. Amsterdam, 6-9 May, 1991.