

We need to be candid about our own values

Kurt Bangert

IN INDIA, development practitioners met unexpected obstacles when introducing coconut trees to a village. The villagers believed that only upper classes were allowed to have such trees, and that a low-caste person planting a coconut tree would instantly die. Only when the oldest villager offered to risk his life (he planted the tree, and lived) did the project proceed. Question: Is development possible without dealing with traditional values and indigenous spirituality? Is it possible without at times challenging the world-views that tend to perpetuate poverty and powerlessness?

A doctor at a Christian hospital in Uganda was about to perform surgery on a non-Christian patient who, frightened as he was, asked the Christian physician to pray to his God so that the surgery would be blessed. Question: Is development possible without being candid about our own spirituality and values?

Development means change. Not only in infrastructure and facilities, but

also in people's minds: a change of thinking, of expectations, of ideas and values. Starting a school in an illiterate community will presuppose, and precipitate, value changes in elders, parents and children. The parent-child relationship will alter, their hopes and aspirations will differ, and ultimately education will impact religious myths, beliefs and a community's world-view.

Unforeseen consequences

And yet, changes brought about by the development process can have unforeseen and undesirable consequences. It is impossible to predict all consequences even of a small alteration in a complex system. Each society is a living organism and constitutes a delicate cultural equilibrium that is easily shaken. Changing one minor aspect of a society may jeopardise the whole, for the whole is more than the sum of its constituent parts. The introduction of new techniques to tribes in New Guinea in the middle of the last century, which greatly simplified the

men's work, had enormous social repercussions. Hence, development workers ought to be on their guard lest they allow one seemingly positive change to have disastrous consequences on society as a whole.

Development workers must be aware of the holistic nature of an indigenous culture. Holism refers to the totality of a society's lifestyle and ideas: the roles people play, their festivals and fairy tales, their marriage and funeral ceremonies, their art and architecture as well as their spirituality, religious myths and traditional values. Development workers are frequently confronted with the all-pervasive power spirituality plays in the lives of the people they work with. Religion is intricately woven into the fabric of many societies in the developing world. Development workers are well advised to learn as much as

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possible of that society's history, beliefs, and spiritual realm. However, to successfully work amongst indigenous people, more is required.

Development practitioners must also demonstrate their own spirituality. To gain the trust of the people they work with, they must document their own religious integrity and spiritual motivation. Many Westerners have banished God from everyday life, and, although they may be Christians, they tend to be modestly moot about their own spirituality. Indigenous people often have difficulty understanding development workers who, while introducing miracle cures and technological wonders, leave God out of the picture. Societies in the developing world may not appreciate being proselytised, but neither do they understand or esteem those who pretend to have no religion at all.



'Religion is intricately woven into the very fabric of many societies in the developing world,' says author Bangert. In this image from Phnom Penh, Wat Phnom sits atop a tree-covered knoll in Cambodia's capital, and is clearly visible from nearly everywhere the city.



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Development workers must recognise that there can be no value-free development. Some professionals may believe in value-free development. But nothing could be further from the truth. The professionals themselves cannot be value free, nor can the development they facilitate. Development workers carry in their baggage the values of their own profession, their culture, their religion or ideology, and it is better to be aware of them and to admit them, rather than to deny them. But more importantly, the changes deemed necessary may require important value changes in the people development workers are working with, and may even require the introduction of new values, such as a girl's right to reproductive health (to prevent genital mutilation), or the virtue of saving beyond the needs of today (an indispensable quality for microcredit systems).

Perpetuating powerlessness

Sometimes, world-views and traditional thinking appear to perpetuate poverty and powerlessness. The Indian

caste system, often justified by religion, may be an example. In such cases, the development practitioner, while attempting to preserve as much of the traditional culture as possible, will challenge the views and values obstructing empowerment and a sustainable life. However, it could be harmful to simply undermine those

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values without making a conscious effort to substitute them with clear, alternative values to which people can knowingly assent. Development is as much about identifying and abolishing bad practices and values as it is about introducing and reflecting new ones.

Communities must be empowered to control the process of change and to be guardians of their own values. Development will only be suc-

cessful if the people agree and desire to develop themselves. This essentially means that they determine the objectives and priorities of their development, control the pace of the process, decide about the changes they think are needed, and define the values to be preserved, altered, or newly adopted. It is this conscious effort of reflecting one's own values which, instead of unconsciously allowing the system to break down, ultimately serves to keep the system intact.

Development must frequently be assessed. To ensure that the holistic system stays intact and that the changes implemented serve the community as a whole, recurrent participatory evaluation is needed. Besides factors of survival, health and economics, it is important to also evaluate values: How did changes impact values and vice versa? A maturing community should keep the discussion about its values and world-views constantly on its agenda. ■

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