

Conference Overview The Poverty of Development: Problems & Possibilities

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Abstract

This paper sets out with the premise that many current development policies are indeed impoverished because they often fail to recognise or value the issues of culture, context, and choice, in the process of planning and implementation. Development policies conducted in a top-down ethnocentric manner do not accommodate local knowledge and hence overlook communities or individuals as innovators. This in turn has negative repercussions on the achievement of sustainability and the future independence of donor-initiated projects. Only when there is mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity in cultures and the living contexts of people involved in the design and implementation of development programmes, can they truly succeed. This paper comprises a synthesis of specific problems encountered and the possible solutions and alternatives offered. Inputs from the SPAFA- IDP International Conference on Issues of Culture, Context, and Choice in Development, held 28-30 November 2002, are utilised to present a global (and not just personal) perspective on the topic.

Introduction of SPAFA

SPAFA, the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, based in Bangkok, Thailand, has been in existence since 1985. SPAFA is dedicated to reviving the "Quality of Life" concept in Southeast Asia by engaging the human hearts and minds that produce art and culture in the pursuit of an equitable social and intellectual environment. SPAFA's vision is to instil pride in Southeast Asian Heritage to enable the careful management of it, and its promotion through sustainable development programmes that directly benefit communities and thus improve people's lives. SPAFA began as a discipline-based Centre, those disciplines being archaeology & fine arts, but its mandate now is much more encompassing and focuses on community development issues.

SPAFA Funding & Politics

SPAFA receives support from the Royal Thai Government. In addition to this, SPAFA is proactive in bidding for funding to enable it to implement various projects. For example, this paper comprises a synthesis of the inputs and discussion presented at

the SPAFA-IDP *International Conference on Issues of Culture, Context, & Choice in Development*, held in Bangkok, Thailand, 28-30 November 2002. The main source of financial support that made that conference become a reality came from the Japan Asia Foundation after successful approval of the project submitted by SPAFA. As well as applying for funding to implement projects, SPAFA is able to increase the scope and extent of its work by capitalising on its strong partnerships with various agencies and organisations on collaborative projects. SPAFA does not accept funding at 'any price' - pursuance of some projects has been dropped if the funding source has made unrealistic demands contingent on the funding being made available. It is a challenge to increase financial security without losing sight of the Centre's mission but it is a challenge that has to be met. If a donor's motives are detrimental to the organisation the offer of support may have to be declined. Examples can be given where donor's politics dictates in one case, and in another case, donor directed imposition on a particular project's implementation, were deemed unacceptable and thus refused.

Priorities and politics, insights and actual involvement, are not easy bedfellows or easily reconciled. This is particularly true for an IGO whose agenda can become blurred whilst trying to maintain the 'balancing act' to adequately satisfy all the stakeholders that the IGO has a duty to oblige. For a regional IGO the number of regional players that constitute that very IGO magnify the problems encountered in equal measure. IGOs are meant to be non-political but actually their very existence is to some extent political in origin and thus they do not operate in a totally politically-free environment.

What are the consequences of these problems? And how can we promote an understanding of the boundaries within which an IGO has to work in order to further the necessity of acceptable compromise? IGOs can no longer be constrained by unrealistic demands often imposed by donors, or likewise, by governmental bureaucracy and vested interest. But what exactly constitutes 'acceptable compromise' in our quest to strengthen the effectiveness of the work undertaken by IGOs? The work undertaken by an IGO must not compromise on principles. One must continuously strive to develop strategies to strengthen capacity whilst limiting the extent to which one sacrifices principles in exchange for cash.

What is development?

What development means:

Development means transformation that reflects improvement for all sectors of society. It must aim to provide access to health care & education for all, thus enabling the poor equal opportunities. Unfortunately, economic development is more often than not focused on protectionist policies that are designed to secure the position of the elite classes only. This very point was a key issue raised at the Conference. Psyche Kennett posed the question: "...how much of the governance agenda is really directed at social services governance; health and education, and how much of it is directed at corporate governance; opening up developing country markets for trade with rich countries?" (1).

Governance

The trend for bi-lateral agencies to abandon programmes in education in favour of those in governance was cited as a distinct move away from a project approach towards a globalised sector-wide approach. What this means in practice is a loss of quality and consensus because education, training, transparency and deliverables become less important considerations. Kennett explained the rationale for this shift towards

governance. Donors maintain that if they continue in their traditional role they promote the 'bad governance' of the recipient government. Furthermore, if donor budgets are channelled into essential goods and services, like education and health, recipient governments are released from accountability and responsibility to the general populace. Sri Lanka's expenditure on the war with the Tamil Tigers, equal to that of aid revenue received, is an example used for support of sector-wide approaches especially as this form of development aid in fact prolongs conflict. However, sector-wide approaches have other agendas. AusAID has cut its education and health budgets for Vietnam for 2003. That money will now be available for Governance because it "...buys more leverage per Aus Dollar" (2).

Although good governance is in itself good-assuming one accepts that development is about the whole environment and all sectors of society- in practice, what does the shift to governance development actually mean? Institutions like the IMF, World Bank and WTO are described as the least democratic and inclusive. Democratic reform of those institutions is crucial. (3) And so how can good governance be advocated when not practised by the organisations that preach it? Can we really expect top down approaches to work?

Top Down and Bottom Up

Many speakers at the Conference highlighted the problems of top down approaches to development as still being pervasive. Examples of how to bridge the gap were given. Haylor and Savage described the guiding principles of their work undertaken in India as being people-focused, participatory and practical-transforming concepts into practice. (4). Consensus-building processes that allow for a 'diversity of voices' to be heard in the policy-making process are advocated and in doing so this promotes equity, minimises conflict and is conducive to tolerance. Jo Durham argued that meaningful participation necessitates involvement at the conceptual stage of programme development, and not just participation as end users. (5).

If donor-inspired political or indeed economic goals become the major objective of the development project, this top-down ethnocentric approach only serves to perpetuate the colonial legacy of Western powers in Asia.

Arturo Escobar, the Colombian anthropologist, comments that development was supposed to be about people, however, the concerns of people are excluded because 'prepackaged' solutions ignore the fact that

change is "...a process rooted in the interpretation of each society's history and cultural tradition". (6)

Rightly so there can not be any 'prepackaged' solution because there is no simple formula for development that can apply to all nations or ethnic groups within single nation states. Neo colonialism as practised by some Western nations and development agencies has major negative implications on development *per se* — namely, adversely affecting the struggle to build independent sources of intellectual power that serve indigenous needs allowing for originality and self respect.

James D. Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, in his article 'Fight Terrorism and Poverty', which examines the challenges facing development in the wake of September 11th, 2001, concludes that developing countries must be in the 'driving seat', "...designing their own programs and making their own choices" (7).

All well and good, one might think. Or is it just a case of being rhetorically correct?

Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist at the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2001, has this to say on Wolfensohn's comment: "Even so, many critics say this process has not gone far enough and that the Bank still expects to remain in control. They worry that the country may be in the driver's seat of a dual-control car, in which the controls are really in the hands of the instructor." (8).

A change process will always take time and during this time we need to know how to gauge what constitutes responsible negotiation leading to reasonable/acceptable compromise. The bottom line rests with the end- beneficiaries. The affect & outcomes on them should be the determining factor.

Decisions made have to be tempered by one's own personal reactions that could range from 'accept anything' whatever the consequences to complete antipathy. One's personal feelings can not be allowed to detract from the realities in which one has to negotiate- remembering that one is negotiating on behalf of a group of people, and not for oneself. Durham talked of taking an 'activist stance' and in my own paper I advocated being a 'change agent' and not just a 'complaining agent'. (9). Kennett referred to the reality of funding that dictates a meeting of the top-down and bottom up from within. And to bridge that gap, try to change the system from without as well as from within. Haylor & Savage's advocacy of

Rights-based Approaches to Development incorporates all these ideas whereby attention is given to issues of accessibility, including access to development processes, institutions, information and redress or complaints mechanisms. Process-based development participation must be meaningful.

Choice & Knowledge

The Changing Landscape of Knowledge was one of the major themes of the Conference. Tan ascertained that the challenge, however, was not just how to navigate knowledge or to be content with what is easily available, but how to seek out and go 'beyond' available knowledge. (10). Effective use of the knowledge economy necessitates recognition that today's landscape of knowledge is not just changing- it is contested. Ovington focussed on the issue of how we learn, and not just what we learn, arguing for a 'holistic conception of self' (11). His assertion that human nature is a product of culture, rather than cultures being different ways of expressing human nature, was also endorsed by Teekens who defined culture as a mental programming of the mind. (12).

In relation to choice, these points on human nature & available knowledge were clearly observed by Durham. Behavioural change regarding UXO in Laos did not occur- and this was not as a result of not understanding the mines awareness training. It was a question of choice options affected by economic and social contextual constraints.

Perceptions

Some people argue that globalisation equals monotony and monoculture, others the reverse. Economist Alan Shipman and author Mario Vargas Llosa are advocates in the latter group.

On the expansion of network technology, Shipman comments that "This not only quickens escape from the tyranny of localisation, but could also be the basis for a growth that trades abundance of material for a broadening of the mind". (13) Vargas Llosa argues that even though folkloric and ethnological variety will lessen with more modernisation, the allegations against globalisation in favour of cultural identity are groundless because they are based on a static conception of culture. This has no historical basis as cultures are continuously evolving. He says "The notion of cultural identity is dangerous. From a social point of view, it represents merely a doubtful, artificial concept, but from a political perspective it threatens humanity's most precious achievement: freedom". (14)

These perspectives are mentioned, as it is important to note that SPAFA's decisions on project implementations are aligned to considerations of all the varying views expressed. SPAFA is not focused purely on preservation. We are not the guardians of any cultural identity only. Our prime objective is that the grassroots stakeholders of development projects are accorded the foremost priority. The benefits for them have to be tangible and most importantly the outcomes have to be wanted and not imposed.

Perceptions on the Corporate Sector

One of the most encouraging things arising from the Conference was the participation of the corporate sector. For example, we had the Shell Foundation participate despite a rather acrimonious beginning that was entirely the organiser's fault. Having listened to Shell advertisements portraying Shell as 'your partner in sustainable development', Shell were contacted with the challenge to prove this as we did not believe it. One's own negativity on this issue was not examined by researching what Shell actually does.

The Shell Foundation's mandate is poverty alleviation through education. Corporate involvement in development projects was also highlighted by Nike, Bangkok Airways, and through the participation of many other companies committed to Mechai Viravaidya's TBIRD project (Thailand Business Initiatives in Rural Development) run by the Population & Community Development Association (PDA). Audience response to the corporate involvement ranged from surprise to hearty congratulation. Most were surprised, not only that the corporate sector was involved at all, but to such an extent to lead the way for the privatisation of poverty alleviation. Capitalising on the business skills of the corporate sector, skills that are usually lacking in government agencies and NGOs, was seen as the way forward for income generation through co-operation and mutual benefit, and not just donation.

The key point to be emphasised here is that whilst the end result of any development project must primarily benefit the recipients of it, ideally all stakeholders benefit and this is the goal of the majority of those of us working in development. However, projects conceived with the fundamental objective of promoting the donor's agenda only

become an 'intervention' directed by that benefactor. This, more often than not, is a waste of money, time, and effort but worse still, it could well have a negative impact or result on the recipients of such 'one-sided' *generosity* that has not been devised through the spirit of mutual co-operation and collaboration. What the corporate sector involvement illustrates is that it is truly possible for participatory mutually beneficial projects to happen- projects that are sustainable and self-funding.

Honesty & Tolerance

An overriding and constructive feature of the Conference was the honesty portrayed throughout. Honesty to admit mistakes, personal and organisational. Honesty to own up to mistaken perceptions combined with a willingness to strive for improvement and the advocacy of tolerance. The very organisers themselves initiated an honest approach.

For example, in the holding of the conference it could be expected that SEAMEO and IDP HQs were ideally placed to work closely together. This possibility, however, was considerably negated because of bureaucracy and organisational structure and planning procedures. This was admitted.

A constructive examination of why this was the case is the only way to try and ensure a more effective working partnership in the future. After all, both organisations share common goals and certainly have the ability to achieve them.

We can not only decry misunderstandings — we must definitely try harder to recognise reality. Perhaps this is easier said than done but we have to try and see beyond our own concerns and limitations and try to understand those of others. Only by doing this can we arrive at an acceptable compromise that does not invalidate our principles.

Author Ben Okri in his novel 'Astonishing the Gods' has a character state that "When you stop inventing reality, then you see things as they really are".

What we can learn from this is that we must always question our own perceptions. Consensus or responsible compromise can be attained if we have the ability to continuously question our motives, and ourselves, ridding ourselves of intolerant attitudes- whilst trying to appreciate the perspectives of the other stakeholders one is working with. Because seldom is anything purely black or white, or so very clear-cut.

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