**International Solidarity and the logic of Development Aid:**

**impossible Bedfellows?**

Jacques Boulet  
Borderlands Cooperative &  
Oases Graduate School for Integrative and Transformative Studies

[jacques@borderlands.org.au](mailto:jacques@borderlands.org.au)  
61- (0)3 – 9819 3239

**Introduction**

This contribution intends to interrogate the conceptual and practical possibility of engaging in ‘international solidarity’ through ‘development’ under the operating and ideological conditions of global capitalism. Having participated in development activism and discourses for almost 50 years, I have witnessed the transmutations of the concept of ‘development’ and its associated practice(s) and – more than ever – have become convinced that it has since long reached its ‘use by’ date. Indeed, its continued use has become counterproductive, especially since most practices, relationships and resource allocations associated with the use of the ‘development’ label at global political-economy and institutional levels and in every-day practice and ‘thinking’ serve to hide the fact that the inequalities and injustices they are designed to ‘alleviate’, or ‘reduce’ or even ‘eradicate’ are, in fact, being *produced* by them systematically and systemically.

“For the rich, there is no logic in denying themselves simply because India has millions of poor people. “I have worked my butt off. I’m not going to be remorseful every time I pass a shanty in my Porsche...” (Suhel Seth)... Mr Ambani’s supporters believe he is entitled to live as he chooses and no one has the right to judge him. After all, his company has provided jobs for thousands of people and contributed to the country’s wealth. In Mumbai though, where half of the population lives on the streets or in slums with no running water, the contrast between the Ambani dream house (a sixty-storey ‘home,’ 27 floors for his family of 3 adults and 3 children), the surrounding poverty is too stark for some…” (Amrit Dhillon (2007) in *South China Morning Post* July 15)

“The Millennium Development Goals process leaves untouched the systemic causes of poverty while relying on ‘campaigns’ and ‘experts’ to calculate the figures and then sell the strategies to governments and civil society. They fail to grasp the meaning of poverty in the lives of the poor, in all its complexity, an existence that for most educated and middle class people carries incomprehensible levels of pain, violence and disorder endured and resisted through back-breaking courage and work. Measuring economic progress, introducing goals to be delivered by governments in blueprints to change the lives of 1.2 billion human beings in 15 years is almost meaningless when you consider what poor men, women and children have to live through in their communities.” (Wendy Harcourt (2007) in *Development* vol. 50 (2) p. 2)
“Official overseas aid is often misunderstood as charity. It is not. This is taxpayer money, compulsorily acquired and spent outside the jurisdiction in which it is collected. Politicians love to bask in the reflected glory of delivering big projects, but there should be return for the people who work to provide the dollars, a profit that can be measured as enlightened self-interest, generating goodwill for Australia and improving the security of the region in which we live…. Realism of this kind doesn’t sit well with the altruism of the aid lobby… there is no contradiction in making the money spent on helping other nations accountable to foreign policy interests…The bigger problem (increases in the aid budget) was the loss of an obvious Australian brand on the aid. A decade ago, most of the budget went into country-to-country programs. These dollars were identifiably Australian, a point that could be reinforced both to the local authorities and populations. …this year…almost a quarter of Australian aid (is) being handed to multilateral funds and non-government partners… and wins little credit for Australia other than bragging rights when compared to other countries.” (Daniel Flitton (2013) in the Age Newspaper September 20, after the announcement that the Abbott Coalition government would cut A$ 4.5 bl. from the aid budget over 4 years to pay for road works in the three major Eastern seaboard cities (in states now also run by the Coalition…))

So there….

**Personal Entry Points**

My involvement in ‘development’ started in the late-fifties and early-sixties in Belgium, my country of birth, at twenty-something years of age, about fifty years ago. It felt like a time of great hope… even if the immediate post-war and post-reconstruction fantasies of a general outbreak of peace, prosperity and welfare-for-all had been dashed by Cold War, McCarthy-ist assaults on democracy, Korea, Vietnam and sundry other places of trouble, a palpable feeling of movement was in the air. Growing up Catholic – as you then did in Belgium – and active in local youth work, the impact of the deep transformational phase the church was going through (or was being invited to by Pope John XXIII, Vatican II and strong social justice Encyclicals) certainly affected me as a young adult. I was told and enthusiastically accepted to be co-responsible for ‘my’ Church and how it represented itself to and in the world, including those parts of the world where our missionaries were working and from which images of poverty, famine, disease mobilised our compassion, charity and, increasingly, our sense of (in)justice.

As in all colonising contexts, we had been brought up in the belief to have been ‘good’ colonisers of the ‘Belgian’ Congo, for about 70 years bringing civilisation-with-the-lot to the ‘poor’ black people of Africa. Initially shocked by the violence associated with ‘our’ colony (like many others) becoming independent in 1960, we were - finally - confronted with rather different historical facts and with the obvious failures of our colonial project (e.g. between 3.5 and 10 million Congolese killed in the first ten years of our civilisatory work…; Hochschild, 1998). Given the spirit of the times alive amongst us young and budding activists, it led to an intense desire to ‘make good’ and to correct the mistakes of
the past. I took part in the first anti-Vietnam-war demonstrations in Leuven, our university town, in the mid-sixties and I became a pacifist; we read about community development, development ‘cooperation’ (Goodenough (1963:16) or Rene Dumont’s *L’Afrique Noire est mal partie*, already then critical of the contradictions of wanting to ‘impose’ pre-conceived development on US President Truman’s ‘under-developed’ masses; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_S._Truman%27s_1949_inaugural_address).

As a social worker, educated in the critical tradition of Cardijn’s and the Young Christian Workers’ (YCW) ‘to see, to judge, to act’ approach (Gigacz: 2008) and the progressive Catholic social doctrines mentioned before, imbued with the possibility and necessity of dialogue, we believed that the UN had it right when it invited debates about development being ‘more’ than just about ‘economics’ and growing GNPs. Already in the late-fifties had the UN-sponsored Social Development Conference in Manila and (from about 1963) UNRISD in Geneva proposed first versions of social indicators (www.unrisd.com) and had challenged reductionist economics, especially those of the Walt Rostow (1960) ‘five stages of (obviously, ‘non-communist’) development’ type. And other early critics had already started to raise their concerns, but the still ‘de-colonising’ world had not yet fully settled into the ‘developed – developing’ dichotomy.

Indeed, ‘development’ was, – as a concept and in general - still untainted and, innocently, we looked at it with the unspoiled conviction that ‘we,’ the developed or ‘advanced’ side of the equation, were obliged and would be able to ‘help’ lift President Truman’s ‘underdeveloped masses… through a program of development based on the concept of democratic fair dealing’ rather than in the mode of the ‘old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit’ (quoted in Rist, 1997:71).

Those really felt like times of change… As for myself, between 1966 and 1969, I spent three formative years in the Congo, working close to the ground with local communities within a large regional development project in the Kasai province – learning a lot, especially about dimensions of life which did and still do not receive much emphasis in our ‘developed’ ways of living and being, returning to Europe with an intense desire to share with friends and sundry what I had learned, promote the ideas which had fed my own motivations and had been reinforced by my experiences…

How sobering then, after all that initial enthusiasm, to hear the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan’s last words upon leaving office in 2006, more than forty years later: “It is not realistic to think that some people can go on deriving great benefits from globalization while billions of others are left in, or thrown in, abject poverty”… And how outrageous to read the three quotes at the beginning of this article… And how shattering to feel like an outdated relic of a long-past era when I wonder aloud about the wisdom of the ‘Washington consensus’ that the way to ‘make poverty history’ has to pass through a ‘phase’ allowing some to amass outrageous affluence first.

So what has and what hasn’t happened? The two 50th Anniversary issues of *Development* (2007), the Journal of the Society for International Development – one retracing the story of the ‘idea’ of development, the other retracing the story of our western dealings and
dalliances with ‘poverty’ – are rather instructive and should be required reading for all. I will cast a brief look at the story of the idea and practices of ‘development’, more particularly the successive critiques thereof, as I experienced and participated in them.

As mentioned, the first foundational critiques of the ‘western’ development ‘model’ and its practices already started to emerge during the late-sixties and early-seventies. Returning from the Congo in 1969, I spent one year at the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague, a cauldron of late-sixties/early-seventies ideas, joining 120 students from 80 different countries – mostly from what were then gradually being called ‘developing’ rather than ‘underdeveloped’ countries, - together attempting to get a grip on the dialectics between the ‘local’ and (what we didn’t yet call) the ‘global’. Whilst much of the debates was still configured around the western/capitalist/first world vs. the eastern/communist/second world ‘cold war’ dichotomy, early critiques transcending these ‘easy’ juxtapositions emerged. Pierre Jalée (1968:106-7; French original in 1965), bluntly and frighteningly prophetic, stated in The Pillage of the Third World:

“In a contracting and tottering world, rivalry among imperialist powers must be moderated and imperialist cohesion established. (The World Bank, International Development Association, Finance Corporation and the like are only the other side of the coin of NATO, SEATO and similar pacts, to say nothing of the Organization of American States.) President Kennedy knew what he was talking about when he stated that the purpose of international aid was to ‘defend the frontiers of the free world everywhere.’ .... Imperialism as a single world system is finding it necessary to manifest itself as such everywhere, but more especially in the Third World. No more special preserves for segments of imperialism, no more secondary confrontations; but, as long as it can be maintained, one great happy hunting ground: the whole Third World for a single, united, complete imperialism.”

Later, during the early seventies and whilst teaching in (West) Germany, I joined EVI – Ex-Volunteers International – an early potent voice in debates about ‘appropriate’ development, the importance of local knowledge and of respect for local culture and the need to critically monitor the use and abuse of (western) volunteers and their non-governmental and governmental sponsors.\textsuperscript{ii} It was returned volunteers who were vocal in questioning the modus operandi of many aid and development agencies and programs and who became instrumental in evolving approaches to development more truthfully representing notions of ‘cooperation’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘reciprocity’. After all, most of us had discovered another truth in the apparent poverty and misery we were going to eliminate – even if we didn’t yet have proper names for what we had discovered.

Development models meandered from the already mentioned ‘stages of economic growth’ (mainly during the fifties), based on large injections of money and infrastructure works, leading to modernisation ‘take off’ and, of course, permanent growth, to the critical realisation that generalised population welfare and human rights did not automatically follow suit. The upheavals of the late-sixties and early seventies thus brought about ‘a new vision of development, characterized by anti-poverty initiatives and
welfare and gender strategies, and as a ‘broad-based, people oriented or endogenous process, as a critique of modernisation and as a break with past development theory’ (Elliot 2002, in Gready and Ensor, 2005:15).

Interestingly but not surprisingly, ‘basic needs’ approaches, the participatory imperative, community development, dependency theories and their imagined alternatives and early Human Rights (including the ‘right to development’) approaches jostled with re-emerging and forcibly imposed neo-classical, neo-liberal fundamentalist market ‘theories’ and associated econometric permutations. And as ‘models’ go, similar to the men and women ‘performing’ in fashion parades, they only ‘worked’ in the climate-controlled antechambers of the IMF, the World Bank, later the WTO and assorted multinationals, some University faculties and, occasionally, in the lead-up to Nobel prizes; however, when rolled out in the steamy fullness of real-life national economies and local communities (e.g. as ‘structural adjustment’ and ‘capacity building’), they created havoc and disaster on every possible level.


Their critiques not only addressed the economic reductionism of mainstream development, but also the associated processes of cultural and linguistic extermination – if not genocide – it perpetrated; the ecological disasters it produced; the worsening of all sorts of marginalisation (gender, age, ethnic/race, ability) it engendered and – importantly for this chapter and for the context of this collection – the un-reflected ways in which key words and concepts of the development vocabulary were pandered about. Indeed, when un-reflected and left as mere rhetorical devices, words like ‘development’, ‘social’, partnership, solidarity, cooperation, sustainable and sustainability, community, globalisation, capacity, ‘social capital’ and others used in the development vernacular become poisoned chalices when offered for conceptual, strategic and practical/contractual agreements, especially when the spectre-question of ‘to be or not to be (funded)’ becomes acute. The ways in which power plays itself out has many faces and under-sides, as Foucault (1977) and many others have been admonishing us and which Rist’s ‘alternative’ formulation of development powerfully underscores (1997:13)

‘Development’ consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require – for the reproduction of society – the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand.’
In this reflective sense and for the remainder of this article, I will explore rather unsystematically three concepts – ‘social’, ‘development’ and ‘solidarity’ – whilst examining – first - the ‘mainstream’ practices of development aid as I have experienced them in my own practice ‘on the ground’, as an evaluator and a lecturer, through reading and participating in ongoing debates, - second - presenting two short examples of alternative ways of framing and practicing such ‘aid’ and – finally - returning to the conceptual level and reflect on possible other – more grounded – understandings of these concepts.

Whilst this may sound rather indulgent to readers, I feel supported by Robert Chambers’ (2005:217)) reflective Ideas for Development, in which he looks back over his own 35 years involvement in development and concludes:

‘… In seeking answers [to questions about the value of development efforts for the poor themselves], experiential learning, critical self-awareness and reflection all help. And it matters who we are and what we become. But in the end it is action that counts most and good effects from what we do.’

The concepts as used and applied within development practice and discourse

To start off and connect with the title of this article, based on my own experiences, notions of solidarity and partnership, so often used in the vocabulary and rhetoric of development programs, policies, statements and individual projects, are inherently inappropriate to describe most processes covered within the ambit of mainstream development aid. At best, they indicate venerable intention and goodwill, at worst, they are just the things one ‘says’ as they have become part of a vernacular which has detached itself from anything development ‘experts’ live their lives like and from anything remotely relevant for the real lives of the real people to be ‘aided’.

In the practices of most mainstream aid organisations – whether governmental or non-governmental – the conditions imposed, the guidelines attached, the log-frames introduced however rationally and cleverly, the formulations of the objectives and ‘strategies’, they all deny the egalitarian and ‘we’re-in-this-together’-suggestion of the above notions. Indeed, ‘solus dare’ – to give/present as one – and ‘partem tenere’ – to hold part in/of – from which solidarity and partnership respectively derive, are suggestive of a collective mindset and a unity our western ideology, which so strongly underpins all of our thinking about development and the social, can’t even fathom any more. The ‘whole’ of which we are part and hold part in does not even figure in many of the development plans, as they are mostly configured within an ideology of competition, cultural self-centredness and righteousness and – as we now refer to it in the social sciences – processes of ‘othering’ (see, for example, Esteva and Prakash, 1998; Derrida, 2001; Shiva, 2005).

The ‘development’ and the modus operandi of the ‘social’ – as in ‘social’ development - we so much intend to ‘help’ the recipients of our aid with, are infused with western (mis-) understandings – and several of the authors I previously mentioned have been often
ferocious critics thereof. As well, if our professed and enacted (western) concern for our ecology – for the earth - is any indication, our sense of collective responsibility for that last ‘commons’ is sorely lacking, casting a critical look on the theatrics of Kyoto, Copenhagen, Rio and even Cancun, of carbon trading, of pollution dumping and general denial of responsibility, even if the west is by far the greatest polluter of them all and has been so for a long time (Shiva, 2005; Adger, N. et al, 2006).

More concretely, the imposition of ‘upward’ financial ‘accountability’ processes on recipients to donors of whatever kind and the disregard for ‘downward’ or ‘lateral’ accountability processes to ‘recipients’ systemically prevent the establishment of genuine solidarity and reciprocity. In Australia and elsewhere, when government financial aid is involved in the resourcing of a project, the standard phrase to justify such practices is that “the Australian tax-payer has a right to know where his/her taxes go to” (see Daniel Flitton’s ‘wisdom’ at the start of this article) and to know “whether they are spent according to the established canons of agreed-upon development process”. ‘Tax-payer-citizenship’ obviously has increasingly prevented the nurturing of a civic morality, taking co-responsibility for the whole of the global; it is even destroying the very principles of distributive justice in developed countries, as the gradual erosion of welfare states shows everywhere (O’Neill, Dietz & Jones, 2010).

As illustrated, in Australia too, there is an unashamedly expressed principle underlying all governmental development aid that it needs to contribute to the Australian economy (in addition to buying political sympathy and – if necessary – open doors for access to resources and Australian-made products, a practice ill-fitting the ‘enlightened interest’ concept used by Peter Singer, 1993:21 but rather well-fitting Flitton’s ‘self-interest’); much of budgeted foreign aid never leaves the country anyway. Non-governmental agencies used as channelling devices for a sizable proportion of foreign aid are held to similar ‘accountability’ practices as well as being sometimes engaged in their own versions thereof – witness the still existing and even expanding scandal of child sponsorships, the middle-class suburban sponsor wanting to know whether ‘his/her’ child indeed received the mosquito-net they were assured was to be part of the sponsoring deal… Do we ever think about how this individualising practice ‘fits’ into a communitarian culture, characterised by its own specific power structures, philosophies, understanding of needs and purpose…? Do we ever think how this practice sits with the local development workers, loaded with the double agenda of running ‘community-oriented’ and ‘community-generated’ processes whilst having to check on ‘selected’ individual kids, whether they go to school and get their injections – things most of the other kids in the same village or community can’t even dream of?

And I haven’t even mentioned where much of that little amount of aid money (in Australia now moving back towards well below .3% of GDP) regularly goes to… the police or the military; or to replacing the squandered bribe millions in the AWB wheat scandal in Iraq and the Reserve Bank money printing disaster; or to alleviate the cost of banning refugees and asylum seekers to stay for years in the bi-partisan ‘Pacific Solution’ ‘developing’ countries; or to implanting or imposing ‘income-generating’ activities into subsistence contexts which instead could be made self-sufficient and sustainable; or into
building unnecessary infrastructure, and on it goes... But I will refrain from entering into those debates... too well-known (the de-funding of Aid-Watch several years ago notwithstanding) and too depressing.

Altogether, many of the development projects and programs – and their originators - continue to disregard the systematic exploitation and dis-appropriation - past and present - of resources, identity and culture which have created and continue to maintain the incredible disparities between ‘our’ developed and ‘their’ developing states ‘international development’ is pretending to address (Shiva, 2005; Chang, 2007 and many others referred to above). To the contrary, rather than thinking about development aid as ‘repair for done damages and payment for stolen property’, such funded projects continue to operate on the basis of the assumption that ‘developed’ is where ‘we’ are at and where ‘they’ are expected to get to – and, as in the quote above, that we ‘worked out butt off to get there’ and ‘they’ would better do as well... Consequently, measurement and ‘auditing’ mechanisms are imposed that inherently deny competence about and authorship for endogenous aspirations and that are expressions of distrust and ignorance about the endogenous ‘capacities’ present in local communities and peoples. They also deny the possibility of alternative ways to alternative developments, deny the recognition that present forms of subsistence may be far better in supporting meaningful and sustainable livelihoods than being forced onto a world-wide pyramid of trans-national exploitation through ‘credit’ or ‘income generating activities’.

Just to end with one example of the lengths to which ‘we’ go when ‘monitoring’ or ‘auditing’ projects funded by ‘us’; ‘sustainability’ – another of the fashionable concepts in the development vocabulary – has become a standard criterion in monitoring and evaluative schemes, to be used by evaluators or to be ‘filled-in’ into requisite questionnaires and reporting schedules. Having been involved in six such evaluation ‘missions’ in West-, Central- and North-East Africa and having read many more (e.g. Chambers, 2005), I had to also deal with the sustainability question, formulated in no uncertain terms as requiring the ‘community’ to think and plan for where the ‘next’ resources would come from, when the money ‘given’ on behalf of the Australian taxpayer would run out (usually after three years...). No mention about the myriad other dimensions of people’s and communities’ ‘abilities to sustain’ – their awareness, knowledge and wisdom, their relationships, culture, practices, systems; no mention about the ecological dimension influencing people’s ability to sustain; no regard for any aspect of the wider, indeed global context and its impact on local people’s ability to sustain...

Thinking the above ‘amputated’ but indiscriminately imposed notion of sustainability into – say – a Senegalese village, where all men above twenty years of age have left into migrant labour in Europe; where the full local economy relies on the work of the women, left behind with lots of children, on those too-old or too-young to work and on some money sent from Europe; where ‘guest’ or ‘migrant’ labour from still poorer surrounding countries (Mali) needs to be imported to assure that subsistence work (i.e. planting and harvesting) gets done; where the Sahel desertification creeps on-and-on-and-on, several kilometres per year... as local colleagues in the to-be-evaluated project despairingly told...
me: ‘you’ve got to have the nerve…’ to ask even more of those people to ‘develop’ themselves and their communities…

But our development economists and other ideologues march on, undaunted…

‘The problem of the bottom billion is serious, but it is fixable. It is much less daunting than the dramatic problems that were overcome in the twentieth century: disease, fascism and communism. But like most serious problems, it is complicated. Change is going to have to come from within the societies of the bottom billion, but our own policies could make these efforts more likely to succeed, and so more likely to be undertaken’ (Collier, 2007:12).

Indeed, you’ve got to have the nerve… especially when then letting everyone know that we’re making progress, with several hundred million of the poor now living on $1.25 a day rather than $1.00…

Some early and ongoing alternatives – if we just cared to look for them

I would like to share some of the experiences and learning gleaned from the work of a Belgian NGO Broederlijk Delen (‘Brotherly Sharing’) and from a Senegalese international environmental development organisation, enda Tiers Monde. Both have been around for several decades, Broederlijk Delen (http://www.broederlijkdelen.be) since the early sixties as the development aid ‘arm’ of the Belgian Catholic Church; enda (www.enda-sigie.org/) since 1972 as an environmental training program funded by UNEP, becoming an international organisation in the late-seventies. Both are involved in ‘direct’ field activities and in the ‘battle of ideas’, arguing their case for an alternative development on all relevant levels, local, national, global.

First Broederlijk Delen;

Broederlijk Delen is an organisation that is conscious of what is happening in the world. Motivated by our Christian belief, we work towards a new world order in which there is a place for everyone… Broederlijk Delen is an open house where there is a place for all who share our dreams of solidarity, be they believers, seekers and non-believers. Through our open windows blow fresh winds of foreign influences, the liberation theology from Latin-America, Asian mystical traditions and the cosmic rhythms of Africa. They broaden our spiritual horizon and feed our Christian inspiration.

The humanitarian efforts of Broederlijk Delen are about attaining “solidarity beyond national frontiers.” Being one of the first organisations emphasising the link between environmental and social justice, the literal meaning of their name, “Brotherly Sharing”, notwithstanding the mild sexism, accurately reflects their “concrete, modest and stubborn” philosophy. Active throughout the world, Broederlijk Delen funds and sponsors some 250 projects in 30 countries, most of which are overseen by a specially appointed, on-the-spot ‘deputy representative’, the ‘monitoring’ and evaluative criteria being established, implemented and ‘practiced’ together with those living and working within the context of the project. By assessing existing resources that are already in place,
the organisation “gives local groups in the South the opportunity to realise their own plans” and manage their own future.

In their fight against poverty and inequality, they collaborate with local grassroots groups specialising in aiding small farmers, fishermen, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, children and youngsters – first taking care of establishing ‘trusting’ relationships and giving control over process and resources to the locals.

In agreement with its Third World partners, the organisation wishes to be influential in the field of political decision-making: the countries concerned... must be brought in a position to defend their agricultural productions against the excesses of economic globalisation, which uses the regulations enforced by the World Trade Organisation.

Broederlijk Delen advertises with the slogan ‘because the South has plans’, expressing its worldview and reflecting the essence or their approach: they don’t set up projects in the South and partners don’t realise their own plans, but their own. Apart from their international operations, they engage in educational activities throughout Flemish Belgium and are involved in advocacy and lobbying in order to try to resolve the structural causes of injustice and oppression. In short, they aim to create a worldwide alliance based on their motto “The earth belongs to everybody”.

Enda Tiers Monde, for its part, ‘carries out, on the basis of grassroots development actions and the struggle of the people in the Third World, a permanent search for a methodology which will respond to their need and desire for independence’. Their priorities are summarised as follows:

- Identification and reduction of socio-spatial disparities, in particular inequalities between and within regions and urban environments;
- Combat imported consumption patterns and lifestyles, especially through a Journal ‘Alternative Living’;
- Combining technologies, taking Third World techniques as a starting point, making use of old technologies and modern ones of the industrial world, encouraging popular creativity with particular attention to energy development in the service of the masses;
- Grassroots communication: reactivating exchanges within neighbourhoods and villages and enriching grassroots experiences, transmitting cultural values, consultations and actions to be undertaken;
- Administration-population relationships: improving the perception of administrators and their activities with peasants and city-dwellers; explore and develop possibilities for positive change in the relationships between them and the population, necessary to gain the administration’s support for self-help development; support for street youth, for the ‘alternative economy’ (referred to by the ‘First World’ as ‘underground,’ ‘black’ or ‘irregular’ economy, but for many in the slums and the villages the only economy they have...);
- Peoples threatened in their cultural survival: changing the perception the rest of the population has of these peoples and supporting development action showing respect for their difference; peoples and human rights.
If there would be one summarising characteristic of the philosophy common to these two organisations, it would have to be the orientation towards assisting local people to (re-)validate the full gamut of resources at their disposal, to (re-)establish their sense of capability and recognise the worthwhileness of their own plans and ideas, and let them make qualitative choices about the lives they want to live and the conditions under which they want to do so.

Whilst it would be fair to say that many international aid organisations would espouse some or several of these working principles and part of the ethical basis of these organisations’ commitment to partnership, cooperation and solidarity based on the belief in the expertise of local people in their own livelihood, the practices of many have been revealed over the years to be anything but what they espouse. There meanwhile exists a vast literature to support this point and the authors previously noted certainly bear witness to some of the disastrous aspects of our well-intended (or sometimes not-so-well-intended) development aid.

**Some beginning thoughts about alternative understandings in our development vocabulary**

Walter Benjamin, in “About the Concept of History,” reflected on “Angelus Novus” (New Angel), a painting by Ernst Klee:

“The Angel of History must look like that: his face is turned towards the past. Whereas we perceive an entire chain of events in front of us, he only perceives one sole catastrophe, which heaps debris upon debris in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole that which has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

Pessimistic...? Yes, but probably necessary to un-do a lot of the vacuous optimism we continue to (have to?) mobilise to get us through the dreariness of our daily disappointments about the hollowness of our understanding of ‘development’ and to develop a more realistic footing on which to rest our hopes.

Alternative ways of thinking and practicing have already been referred to, the already mentioned authors being amongst them. Other obvious candidates include Fritz Schumacher (McRobie, 1981), Clodomir de Morais (1996), Raff Carmen (1996), Thierry Verhelst (1990) and others working in the traditions celebrating respect for local cultures, ‘bottom-up’ processes, deep democracy, participatory approaches and, most importantly, the many alternative and ecologically aware approaches encompassed by the worldwide movement(s) of the World Social Forum (Houtart & Polet, 2001) amongst others.

It may have become clear that we are faced with a problem of language (see also Harcourt, 2009:26 and Pease, 2010:51 ff., who approaches this issue as one of ‘epistemological privilege’); the English language – meanwhile imperial in nature – has
adapted itself to the ways of being and purposes of those who control its usage and much
of the ‘things’, processes and structures under their power. Our words for referring to the
‘social’ and its multifarious relational aspects have become abstract, formalised, empty of
direct-real-life meaning – in a sense, following the ‘empty’ and formalised and ritualised
social reality we inhabit. At a time where we ‘stay in touch’ but don’t ‘touch’; where we
have ‘relations’ but have difficulty ‘relating’; where we talk about the ‘community’ and
could refer to anything from ‘the global community’ to the neighbours next door (whose
name we often don’t know); and where the freely dispensed stigma of ‘un-Australian’
has become the miracle-whip formula to ideologically in- or exclude what it takes to be
part of the Australian ‘community’; – in such a time, I think, is it necessary to cast a
careful look at our language and – if necessary – reclaim it together with the practices
needed to re-constitute our sense of the social.

Furthermore, if acting in ‘solidarity’ or in ‘partner-like’ ways is the goal of development
plans and projects, another paradigm of reciprocity will need to be developed, learning
from, amongst others, the experiences and methodologies of the briefly mentioned
organisations, but also based on a thorough revision of many of the notions we use and
the western practices they intend to cover.

First, the ‘social’; it seems strange that westerners should declare themselves to be
experts in what it may mean to ‘be’, ‘live’ and act in a ‘social’ way. After all, our
individualistic reductionism has left us with a rather poor understanding of what it means
in real terms, ever since ‘loosing’ the ‘commons’ sometimes between the 15th and 17th
centuries, not only in England but gradually across the European continent. Readers
steeped in the story of social work, charity and welfare will remember how in
Elizabethan England, the ‘Enclosure Laws’ essentially legitimated the stealth of the
common base upon which communities’ existence was grounded, leaving it to the
emerging industrialists, aristocrats and early-modern landowners in what could be called
an early ‘privatisation’ exercise. The creation-by-legislation of hundreds of thousands of
destitute people, vagrants, beggars – a proletarian welfare class - then necessitated the
revision of the Poor Laws, introducing all the ideological parameters upon which
presumed self-sufficient individualism is build (‘deservedness’ and ‘less-eligibility’ of
welfare support, for example; The Ecologist, 1993).

Following that, Europe exported the destruction of community and the ‘enclosure’ of
ever-wider quantities of people’s lands in the invaded lands and colonies (in Australia,
conveniently declared ‘terra nullius’, no-one’s land and therefore free to be taken and to
be used ‘properly’) with devastating consequences for lives and livelihoods across all
continents (Marks 2003; Young, 2001). Emerging capitalism and its associated ideologies
then did the rest – transforming us, Westerners, into nomadic monads, longing to belong,
pursued by our pursuits and possessed by our individual possessions and other
consuming passions.

What we then understand the ‘social’ to be – as in social development – necessarily is
being reduced to indicators of individual longevity (‘life expectancy’), level of income
and private assets, school-based education, medically preserved health, the aggregate
of which we then declare to be the ‘state’ of the ‘social body’ along variants of the dichotomous continuum of being ‘developed’ to under/less-developed/developing. We then also invent commensurate words to ‘remedy’ the lack of ‘sufficient’ quantities of the thus identified indicators: ‘social’ capital, ‘community’ development or capacity building, etc. as if we still had a clue about what it really ‘means’ to be ‘social’… The gleeful descriptors of Putnam (2000, ‘bowling alone…’), Coleman (1988) and other devotees of social capital, for example, totally ignore the need to understand the social in its felt, practiced and relationally-lived experiences, rather focusing on its functional purpose to transcend difference and form a ‘common civic culture’ (Arneil, 2006). There has meanwhile been enough critical material produced about ‘social capital’ and ‘capacity building’ (Kenny & Clarke, 2010), so I will not further engage in a critique of these discourses in this article – it seems important, though, to at least have mentioned them, given the devotion we have developed for ‘new’ models promising fail-proof results in the development stakes.

It is encouraging, however, to note that less-utilitarian and less-functionalistic epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches to the social sciences have recently emerged, reconnecting with older traditions in sociology, anthropology and ethnology, the work of Godbout and Caillé (1998), Arnason (2003), Latour (2005), Hoy (2004) and Papilloud (2004) offering just some examples. Just to mention one, Arnason, suggests the need for a companion ‘civilisational analysis’ to ‘social theory’, which is ‘very much about taking seriously the idea of diverse ways of being-in-the-world’ – offering a counterweight to the rationality-imbued and functionalistic understanding of the social as a ‘system’. Such approach not only allows but posits the necessity of the exploration of the interpretive prisms and practical orientations of social agents and their intrinsic diversity. Whilst such views may not be very suitable to the whole-sale implementation of ‘structural adjustments’, they offer a much fairer chance that those of us who want to assist in ‘developing the social’ can gain a grasp of what the social means for people and what they may think development should lead to.

In that spirit, let me finish by suggesting some starting points for further reflection:

- We need to develop other ways of thinking about reciprocity, based on a social rather than contractual understanding of relationships of solidarity; a good start would be to re-think some of the work on gift-relationships as occurred in the earlier phases of the development of the social sciences and before structural-functionalism took over (around the thirties, especially in the US). After all, if we would care to think about the material and human resources the West has robbed during the last centuries from the developing world; if we admit that our impact has been one of retarding endogenous developments which either were already occurring or could/would have occurred; if we would allow such thoughts to enter our consciousness, our sense of ‘just relationships’ would demand restitution and restoration or fair compensation. That, in turn, would require us to establish processes of accountability based on restorative justice (Abu-Nimer, 2001:74 ff) and global accountability (Ebrahim & Weisband, 2007), rather than on abbreviated notions of ‘aid’, unequal notions of
cooperation, self-interested notions of development and exploitative ideologies of charity or ‘care’ (Chang, 2007).

- We need to become more critical of and reflective about suggested strategies for (social) development, including small credit, social enterprise and income generation schemes, even if they now represent the main fare amongst local development cognoscenti (Borderlands Cooperative and Good Shepherd, 2011). ‘Attaching’ or ‘inserting’ the poor/excluded/marginalised systemically and deliberately into a meanwhile global system of (capitalist inspired) exploitation and inequality (the calculation of their assumed poverty in one-dollar-a-day terms…) whilst robbing them of the ‘commons’ upon which their subsistence, their cultural identity and the associated skills and relationships are built does not seem to be a good start given what has been discussed before. Validating people’s existing and traditional ways of survival – even if the basic resources and infrastructure for survival have been eroded, alienated or neglected over many years – is a better way to reconnect with sustainable modes of livelihood and eventually restore capacities for self-directed adaptation to new living conditions and the maintenance of cultural specificity and diversity (Esteva and Prakash, 1998; Shiva, 2005).

- More particularly related to development cooperation, solidarity-based forms of reciprocity and partnership between organisations and communities in the ‘developed’ world and those in the ‘developing’ world can only occur when cast in the context of community-to-community relationships, even if they are ‘managed’ by large organisations. In the process, ‘developed’ communities may discover that there is benefit in being able to re-learn a great deal about the social through the experience of solidarity and reciprocity still alive in communities we think we have to help ‘develop’ socially (mostly reduced to ‘economically’). We may then start to heed the message of Nussbaum (2010:143) that

("If the real clash of civilisations is... a clash within the individual soul, as greed and narcissism contend against respect and love, all modern societies are rapidly losing the battle, as they feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect.")

As well and finally – and this is very much based on my personal experiences – humbly admitting the damages done to ourselves by our ‘modern’ ways of being and living, both socially and psychologically; humbly admitting that our own thoughts about development are not necessarily good for ourselves let alone for our ‘partners’; in fact, humbly admitting that we really don’t know either ‘whereto’ in an increasingly fragile and uncertain world may offer a better, more modest, humble and truthful basis to start a productive and careful mutual relationship from – that is, in the true sense of the word, one which is ‘full of care.’ Franco Berardi (2009:218-9) puts it as follows:

("The very notion of wealth has to be reconsidered: not only the concept of wealth, but the perception of being rich. The identification of wealth with purchasing power is deeply embedded in the social psyche and affectivity... The disciplinary culture of modernity has equated pleasure and possessing. Economic thinking has created scarcity and has privatized social need, in order to make possible the...")
process of capitalist accumulation. Therein lies the source of the current depression.’

To Amartya Sen’s (2007) admonishing experts ‘who are morally obtuse enough to not be moved by the existence of poverty alone’ and impose economic-reductionist ‘development’ measures on them, I would thus want to add my own admonition that all of us on the ‘developed’ side of the equation would do well with a careful re-examination of where ‘development-as-we-know-it’ has got us to.

And if, after such examination, we then throw up our hands and admit that we can’t stop the roller-coaster, the once-proud project of Truman’s ‘invention’ will have become like Benjamin’s ‘storm blowing from paradise.’ As Majid Rahnema (1997) in his Post-Development Reader concludes, that will lead to the “great fear we have of becoming fully aware of our powerlessness in situations where nothing can be done” – but since western culture has made us rather inept at facing our fear and our powerlessness, a great mental and emotional shift is needed to enable us to rediscover our true limits and possibilities.

And as Rahnema continues, turning our powerlessness into a learning moment would require us to look at the world realistically and do what we can to help it heal… and then discover ‘…the secrets of a power of different quality: that genuine and extraordinary power that enables a tiny seed, in all its difference and uniqueness, to start its journey into the unknown. And therewith, as in the legacy Paulo Freire (1994) left us with, ‘hope’ – in its symbiotic link with love and faith - will be the only thing for us to rely on… even in the face of spreading hopelessness…

References

Benjamin, W. “On the Concept of History” in Illuminations New York: Schocken
Borderlands Cooperative and Good Shepherd (2011) Microfinance for Microenterprise and the interaction with the Consumer Credit Market Melbourne: Borderlands and Good Shepherd


Dhillon, A. (2007) Comment in *South China Morning Post* July 15


Flitton, D. (2013) “Sorry kids, to be honest, we’re not a charity” in *The Age Newspaper* September 20 p. 17


George, S. (1984/90) *Ill fares the Land, collected essays* Harmondsworth: Penguin


Queens University Press
Sen, A. (2007) *Unity and Discord in Social Development* Keynote Address for the 15th Symposium of the International Consortium for Social Development in Hong Kong on the 16th of July

---

1. Probably, at present, a bit hard to believe that it was a US President saying such things; but even the next US Presidents were either warning us of the dangers of the ‘military-industrial complex’ (Eisenhower) or sending thousands of young Americans to show the world another face of the US, a ‘Peace’ Corps, promising all manner of support for ‘development’ and a new world order of sharing… (Kennedy) as long, of course, as it wouldn’t involve those associated with the ‘Evil Empire’ – but that nomenclature only descended upon us 20 years later, with the Reagan-Thatcher axis ‘TINA’ (there is no alternative) promises of capitalist-rationalist trickle-down-freedom-and-prosperity-for-all impositions in full swing.)

2. Their ‘Informationszentrum Dritte Welt’ still publishes one of the best critical Development journals worldwide. Also note that we had started to use the notion of ‘Third World’, both a verbal act of utter ‘enlightenment’ arrogance and an attempt at dissociating from the ‘(under-)developed/developing’ assumptions.

3. It is of course not possible within the confines of this chapter to even try and cover as much ground as the rather spectacular newest volume – *Deconstructing Development Discourse* (Cornwall, A & Eade, D., eds.; 2010) published in cooperation between Oxfam and the Schumacher Centre for Technology and
Development’s Practical Action Publishing Co. Many of the assertions I make in this chapter have ample resonance in the 29 chapters of that very welcome addition to the critical development literature.

iv Just a few weeks ago, the de-funding of AidWatch imposed by the Howard Government several years ago under the ‘rule’ that government-funded organizations were not to engage in ‘advocacy’, has been ruled illegal by the Supreme Court of Australia – see New Community Quarterly, vol 8 (3))