

Seeking the Eye of the Needle

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seeking the eye of the needle

'I am not interested in whether I act correctly or incorrectly from the point of view of a method. For me it is important if in a very specific, concrete situation I can do something fruitful. The good always takes place in a situation' Bernard Lievegoed

CDRA works primarily within (or with, or through, or however one describes it) the development sector. The sector which, broadly speaking, works with processes of social transformation. The sector which, ideally speaking, works to reduce poverty. Poverty can be seen, in its narrowest sense, as a lack of material resources; more broadly speaking, the development sector may work with wider poverty concerns – imbalances in society, questions of equity and freedom, of ecological and social sustainability, of economic relations, of political and cultural repression, or any area in which social dysfunctionality exists. Generally speaking, however, the intentions of the development sector are often reduced to their narrowest denominator: the reduction, alleviation or – stated with more vigour or hubris (depending on where one views it from) – the eradication, of material poverty.

But the rhetoric associated with poverty reduction is no longer the preserve of social activists, within or outside the development sector. They are all at it these days. George W. Bush wants to 'attack global poverty'. Tony Blair is up for 'attacking the causes of global poverty' and the remaining G8 leaders are apparently engaged in 'the fight against global poverty'. Meanwhile, the World Bank is 'fighting grinding poverty', the World Trade Organisation is 'reducing poverty on a worldwide basis', and the International Monetary Fund, bailiff to the developing world, is 'actively combating world poverty' (Steve Tibbett in the Mail and Guardian, 04/07/03, *A spoonful of sugar for the poor*). Yet the rich get richer, and the poor, poorer.

Now, it has become clear to all but the most ignorant ostrich, that that little word 'yet' in the previous sentence is badly mistaken. It is in fact, the name of the game – even while the game is played in another name – for our world institutions to get the rich richer, while the poor stand in ever lengthening queues in the polluted city streets. This perspective used to be the preserve of the cynic; it must be, by now, surely, the preserve of everyone save the dumbest ostrich. The forces which have usurped the terrain of social activists, and of the development sector, are as rampant as the US special forces in Iraq.

Given the state of world affairs, the overall intentions of the development sector are not good enough. They never have been. Those intentions, outfitted with all manner of laudly aims and objectives, and decorated with rhetorical devices like 'partnership' and 'ownership' and 'mainstreaming', have never really delivered on their promise. Not only because, now, they have been drawn into a game not of their making (or have they?), but because those intentions were never fleshed out with a practice, a methodology, which was articulate and elaborated. We have, for so long now, rested on our intentions, that we can no longer differentiate between the mainstream and an alternative stance. In a certain sense, the development sector has always operated from within the mainstream, where hegemony and control are the name of the game. The only way to build the alternative approach is to pay attention to practice. It is, indeed, by their practice that you will recognise them.

A perspective on social change

The development sector has never (or only as an individual whisper from the corner of the room) articulated an approach to social change which informs intervention into social processes. Relying mostly on baldly stated objectives and a comforting rhetoric, its approach to social change is couched within the dominant scientific world view of our time. This means, to be very concise and precise, that it takes an engineering approach to the world, views it as a mechanical device, reduces complexity and the interdependence of systemic wholes into fragmented parts which can be isolated and manipulated, and then attempts to input ‘causes’ which will have predictable ‘effects’. In this way, social change (for example, poverty reduction) may be controlled in much the same way that an air conditioner might control the temperature in a room. Not only this, but development projects (and organisations) themselves can be controlled (and held accountable), through time-bound objectives which can be rigidly foreseen and tightly measured.

This is the instrumentalist approach, which results in – indeed, calls for – the use of tools and concepts which have their origin in business, the military, or engineering concerns: the strategic plan, the logical framework instrument, quantitative measuring, the emphasis of product over process. This is the powerful and persuasive tradition behind the promotion of strategic thinking and planning as the way to achieve impact in development. And so little outcome of any import is achieved.

Because a social situation, or community, or organisation, or even an individual human being, is not a mechanical thing, a product. It is an organism, an evolving phenomenon always in a process of change and becoming, with porous boundaries and complex interdependencies. Social situations are complex systems, existing at the edge of chaos, with deep underlying patterns of order; simple elements relate to each other in rich, dynamic ways, from which complex phenomena emerge which cannot be predicted or explained by the simple (individual) components or their individual relationships. There is a ‘web’ of relationships with positive and negative ‘feedback loops’ which ‘result’ in the complex phenomenon – aka the new sciences – made up of relationships. And the phenomenon, too, feeds back and patterns the relationships which form it, so cause and effect are not easy to discern (‘cause’ is affected by the ‘effect’ which becomes a ‘cause’). So the ‘whole’ system is non-linear, constantly evolving, ‘becoming’, affecting us as we affect it. Who then controls what? Such a system is alive, emerging, becoming, developing, changing, metamorphosing *all the time*.

Phenomena have to be apprehended not as static or completed products ‘out there’ but as processes, flows, movements and activities, because they are always becoming. And we are participating in that becoming, both effecting and being affected by it (never separate). We try in vain to ‘map the territory’ – through strategising, planning, and myriad management tools – but the territory is changing even as we map it, and as a function of our mapping. Our job is not management of input towards preplanned outcome as a rational activity performed by an outsider on an inert object. Our real job – as development practitioner, social activist, development sector – is to get inside the movement, and keep it open, alive, emerging. Be inside and outside at the same time. Guide and be guided. Be aware of the flow, the process, the becoming. Be aware of self as much as other, of changing relationships, of pattern and balance, of the ephemeral whole. This is a far cry, a very alternative approach, from the game of prediction, control and manipulation, which seeks to do to others (or, at best, on behalf of others) without oneself being affected or changed in the process (other than, perhaps, to become more comfortable)

The development activist, then, cannot rest with the vacuous and grandiose intentions espoused by both those who dominate our social, political and economic fields, or by the development sector which can barely be discriminated from the former (except in the sense that it influences very little). The bluff contained in the intention is exposed by the plethora of engineering instruments borrowed from elsewhere and by the absence of an identifiable, unique and alternative practice which is geared to actual intervention into the maelstrom of social development. What, then, are we really talking about?

The development sector re-imagined

The above characterisation of the development sector – as little different from, perhaps handmaiden to, the forces of global hegemony – seems to amount to what we have made of the sector. Potentially, though – possibly and ideally – the development sector has a vital and significant role to play in these desperate times. If it can imagine itself differently, and adopt an approach to practice, to intervention, which reflects this difference. This calls for a radical rethinking of the place it (we) occupies in the social sphere. Ironically, such radical rethinking does not call for a repositioning, but rather for a recognition of position already taken (though without due regard).

The development sector struggles with issues of accountability. Rightly so. These are not to be avoided by the (supposedly) rational utilisation of management instruments which attempt to elicit a ‘bottom line’. (The very notion of a bottom line is, in the realm of social change, a fiction.) More immediately relevant, though: they should not be avoided because they are the most startling indication of the development sector’s place in the world we have created. This world exhibits an increasingly dominant centre surrounded on all sides by increasingly ragged and under-resourced margins. Those on the margins, increasing numbers of them, have little recourse to the fruits of social (and scientific) progress; while the centre gathers ever more surplus to itself, sometimes dispensing largess with the indifference of an infrequently ashed cigar.

The development sector is positioned precisely on the continuum between the centre and the periphery. This is why we struggle endlessly with issues of accountability (not to mention identity). Are we primarily accountable to the structured institutions of the establishment or to the loose social formations and movements of the majority who reside at the margins? The development sector operates at the interface between the citizenry of the world (and their living planet) and the sovereign institutions of the state and economic sectors. We operate where there is critical dysfunction in the relationships between the different parts of society.

When the excesses of the economic sector result in the exclusion of the majority of the people it is meant to serve, there is need of intervention by the development sector. When the ecology of relationship between human society and its natural environment breaks down, there is need of a development sector. When the relationships that characterise a civil human society erode to the point of dysfunctionality, the development sector is compelled to respond. This is the common thread that defines our sector. Examples are endless – relationships between women and men, between human and planet, between citizenry and the state, between minority and majority, between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ worlds, between centre and margin. At the interface where relationships become unbalanced, dysfunctional, or fail outright – the development sector should find its home. The development sector straddles – in the name of a more ecological, social, humane, civil society.

Given such a position, there is a powerful role that can be played. Thus far, however, the development sector has chosen otherwise. By and large, it has chosen to act as go-between in the relationship between unequals – the centre and the periphery. Accountable de facto mostly to the centre, it has chosen a particular role – to manage the transfer and delivery of essential goods and services in situations where the mainstream relationships and processes of society have failed. The intention is not to seek to intervene into the malfunctioning of the relationships themselves, but to act as an efficient and effective palliative measure.

This is obviously so where the sector is engaged with welfare, or with emergency aid, or generally with the delivery of resources, the promotion of economic development alternatives, self-help schemes, and so on. (The latter two could be engaged with differently, but within the current scientific management paradigm, the comment stands). This is the arena, in the narrow sense, of poverty reduction. Where the sector engages with activism, advocacy and policy influencing work, with human rights issues, it is less obviously so; but in a profound and underlying sense, the notion of transfer remains paramount. We do to others, or on behalf of others, without expecting change for or within ourselves. All the strategies we pursue risk becoming simple transfer as opposed to transformation.

Of course there are many within the development sector who act differently, who increasingly adopt a more developmental approach. Our institutions constrain us, however. The distinction between the current work of the development sector, and a developmental approach to social change, has not yet become clear enough for an articulated response and an alternative practice to emerge, at least with any thoroughness. The seeds of the developmental approach, though, are contained within the recognition of the interfacing position within which the sector finds itself. There are myriad possibilities, myriad responsibilities, entailed by such a positioning.

A developmental approach

There is a significant distinction between ‘development work’ – as the transfer of something from one party to another – and ‘developmental practice’, as critical intervention into social change. Yet the distinction is a subtle one. We take the ubiquitous notion of ‘capacity building’ as a case in point.

Capacity building is currently enjoying a revival as one solution to the development sector’s greatest conundrum – that no matter how much we put in, things seem to stay the same, or worse, they get worse. Proponents of capacity building argue that resources alone cannot solve the problems that development sets out to address. What is needed is ‘capacity’ – human, organisational, institutional – to solve problems and harness resources in an ongoing way. More so, this capacity does not entail simple skills (though it includes them). Capacity has gradually come to be understood as a far greater competence and health and, increasingly, resources are being allocated for building just this vision.

The nuanced understanding expressed in this analysis indeed goes against the grain of the development sector, which is why it has been so slow in gaining credence. Yet, even now that it has emerged, the practice that flows out of this analysis tends to fall very short of the promise it offers. Money is set aside for short-term technical interventions; capacity building is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) seen as the next new thing done by those with capacity to others who do not yet have it; ‘capacity building’ becomes an event, a product to be delivered, not an ongoing process; the capacity ‘gap’ (between our intentions and our abilities) is something that can be filled . . . and so

we fall back to where we were: Development remains the simple delivery of product; and capacity, then, is just its latest commodity. The complex accompanying relationship changes and challenges that are begging to be tackled, questions of one's own capacity and ongoing capacity needs, become lost in the drive to delivery . . . the people involved in strategising and establishing capacity building programmes are often aiming for just the subtle and complex relationship work that a developmental approach requires, yet somewhere along the way, it becomes lost. The underlying tendency of approach contained within the development sector surreptitiously – and often unconsciously – gains the upper hand.

Of course, there will always be transfer work to be done by the sector, we should be under no illusions about this, either in terms of need or rationale. But it is the way that it is done, the practice of doing it, that is at issue here. A developmental practice, we read above, requires 'subtle and complex relationship work'. What might this mean?

Working 'developmentally' involves a fundamentally different starting point from simple transfer. This approach embraces a systemic understanding of society in which the party intervening considers itself a part of the system into which it is intervening. Thus, we cannot simply 'fix' a wrong, or an imbalance, through focusing only on another (on 'the other'). A developmental approach demands that we consider ourselves in relation to that other – and so any attempt to intervene must reflect back on the intervener, asking the same questions we ask of the other, of ourselves. Seen developmentally, capacity building – to return to our example above – becomes less a simple transfer from one with 'more' to one with 'less', and more a continuous process of increasing awareness of one's own capacities in relation to others, and therefore, enhancing the capacity of the system as a whole. Which means, too, understanding the other in context – the forces that constrain and enable – and recognising oneself as an integral aspect of such forces, requiring, as well, change and development (learning and unlearning) if the system is to renew itself.

And more. The 'system' we are intervening into is alive, with 'porous boundaries and complex interdependencies'. It is an organism, not an artifact. Development itself is a process inherent in all natural, living and organic entities. It is not something created by the intervener, from the outside. It already exists, as internal to the organism. Development is the life process that keeps the infinitely complex web of relationships – which is the organism, which is society – constantly unfolding and transforming. Becoming. This is what it means to be alive.

Developmental intervention, then, is guidance from the inside, out. Not a 'doing to, or for', but facilitation. A 'working alongside'. Not preplanned from the outside, but responsive to the shifting needs of the system as it moves along its path of becoming. Social organisms, being self-conscious and therefore responsible for their own process, can hit impediments with respect to this process. The flow and movement can become blocked and entangled. Imbalance, dysfunctionality, stuckness can set in. A developmental practice seeks to work with these stucknesses, to help the system right itself, open itself, and come into movement once more.

The pith of a developmental practice lies in helping the system to find its balance, so that it can continue to emerge. (Developmental practice, then, implies an open-endedness, an approach which does not seek to predict so much as anticipate). And balance means mediation between order and chaos, between established pattern and new impulse, between centre and periphery. The centre, the established order, is necessary for stability, but stability can easily turn into stasis, arresting further movement; while new impulses arise from the margins, from a periphery free of the taboos imposed

by the given, but risk fragmenting evolving process into unproductive chaos. The interdependence between center and periphery cannot be overstated.

This is why the position that the development sector finds itself in, its place in society at the interface between centre and periphery, is so relevant, so apposite, so precise. If it could match its practice to its position – or take its guidelines for practice from a perceptive reading of its position – then it would find its place, its alternative stance. Not simply to transfer, from one side to another, in a manner which leaves both itself and society as is; but to engage in the ongoing dynamic between centre and periphery, in an open ended, non-prescriptive, self-reflective fashion – to bring movement back into that dynamic, so that the social is able to come alive once more.

Coming alive

Complex systems are composed of relationships, both between their various aspects and between themselves and the environment they interact with. They are nothing less than that which arises through such relationships. Like the rainbow which emerges through the complexity of a particular relationship between water and dust and light and dark; and, like the rainbow, they have no beginning and no end, and gather themselves and fade away again in response to particular configurations of relationship at particular moments in time. They are, in fact, those relationships – and the story that they tell.

Complex relationships are alive where they are becoming and developing; they are alive to the extent that there is a free interplay between the relationships which compose them. They are alive where these relationships find a balanced freedom of movement. Which in turn is found in an absence of inner contradiction. Tension, yes, between one polarity and another, so that movement is generated through the energies entailed in seeking resolution; but inner contradiction leads to sufficient imbalance to grind the process of becoming to a halt. At which point, we have an inert object, incapable of further movement – other than decay – rather than a living process. Freedom from inner contradiction, in the realm of relationship, is what we mean when we speak of ‘sustainability’; though we lose accuracy with respect to what we mean when words degenerate into jargon.

The developmental approach – the way through which development work is carried out – should be entirely about relationship, in the first instance human relationship (though it seldom is). Building relationships free of inner contradiction is not only the means, but also the outcome of the endeavour; from beginning to end (though it is seldom seen this way). When workers in the development sector enter a new situation, they often describe their initial activity as ‘fact finding’ – and so employ the requisite instruments – when in reality this phase of engagement (if it is to be real engagement at all) is all about establishing a relationship of trust between parties (which requires no instrumentation, rather the necessity to ‘be oneself’, and therefore, of course, to know oneself). When the development sector assesses outcomes, it focuses on quantifiable measures with respect to the tangible product which was originally predicted (and employs the requisite instrumentation). In reality a developmental outcome has everything to do with the changes in relationship that have occurred (which may be anticipated but cannot be predicted, and which cannot be assessed via any instrumentation, rather via the very human capacity for knowledgeable understanding – an admittedly ‘developed’ faculty which requires disciplined application).

An engaged, authentic approach to relationship is a prerequisite for a developmental practice, rather than the current propensity for simplistic procedures, participatory tricks and managerial techniques. The more we work on, and through, relationship, the more we connect all of us to more of ourselves. And this, surely, is development itself.

Relationship is one side of the coin; freedom the other. Freedom to pursue authentic relationship, freedom from inner contradiction, freedom from the stuckness which curtails movement, freedom which is movement, which allows the development process to unfold, which enables 'becoming'. Freedom which comes as new impulse from the margins to shake the center awake; freedom which enables those on the margins to shape their society towards a sustainable future. Freedom to engage.

A developmental practice, towards social transformation, will always – must, almost by definition, always – act in the service of freedom. A developmental practice will seek inclusivity, and lessen exclusion. The development sector will find its place within civil society, that social process which works between the excesses of polarity to encourage the human project in its quest for a more humane, purposeful and conscious future. The privilege of occupying an interfacing position entails the maintenance of free space in which to develop.

It is about rolling back boundaries that limit change, and encouraging the risk-taking required to let go of old ways so that experimentation may lead to the new. It is about building ways of relating in freedom, and out of freedom. A developmental practice must facilitate the creation of spaces in which, through which, people can move, risk, experiment and recreate images of themselves and of their relationships with others, and with their environment.

Seeking – the eye of the needle

This is not the place to detail details about practice. The details, anyway, are still emerging; the discipline is young yet. But something must be said about the fundamentals of a developmental practice. Its particular challenge; the question that it asks of us, perhaps. Or: What, specifically, is the eye of the needle through which an evidently developmental practice must pass?

We are asked to entertain the thought of a practice which is open-ended, reliant on authentic human relationship and knowledgeable understanding, working towards opening things up through working alongside and facilitating the emergence of the new, which will hopefully involve a lessening of inner contradiction in favour of a sustainable living dynamic. Knowing that we cannot predict the outcome of our interventions, only seek to anticipate and so adequately respond to the shifting needs of the system as it moves along its path of becoming.

Such an approach, geared towards freedom, can only be practised in freedom. It stands to reason. Not only can instrumentalist managerial techniques never hope to encompass the nuances of such a practice, but the need for them, in the name of accountability and control, undermines the essential capacity demanded of developmental practitioners. The use of such techniques implies a mistrust of authentic and accountable free human endeavour – which lies at the base of such a practice – rather than the propagation of it. In fact, such techniques imply – let us (try to) get away with – irresponsibility.

We cannot engage freedom without engaging responsibly. Not as an opposing polarity, but as part of the very notion itself. Freedom without responsibility is not freedom at all, but license. License and

responsibility, as polarities, give rise to freedom. Freedom, in the sense of a living sustainability, entails responsibility.

And responsibility can only be encouraged through free human activity. For a developmental approach to be authentic, for practitioners to hone the faculties and capacities indispensable to such an approach, the discipline must become an inner practice, emerging out of an inner propensity and striving. Anything less will take us back to where we were – the need for prediction and control, for the short term project and its quantifiable result. Bogus intention will again replace alternative practice.

To adopt this stance will challenge the development sector – with its managerialist tendencies – to its outer limits. In a sense, this is the eye of the needle, this is what is being asked of us. To engage fully in a radically different approach to life, and to the social. To regard the social as alive, and to treat it as we would a loved one.

We know that we are, as yet, inadequate to such a practice. It is only through engaging such practice – authentically and thoroughly – that we will become adequate. Such a practice demands far more of us than an instrumentalist practice ever will. To become adequate is to recognise our inadequacy, and practise nonetheless.

We can only proceed, in that case, by committing ourselves to continuous and relentless reflection on action. So that we are learning, and unlearning, all the time. This is the accountability which can, and must, be demanded of the sector, by the sector. If the developmental organisation, the developmental practitioner, is constantly inquiring into the validity and calibre of their practice, then responsibility can be seen to be authentic. Such a questing stance is accountability. Seeking the eye of the needle, then, we discover that the very activity of seeking is the eye of the needle. An attentive awareness, a rigorous interest cultivating an intimate engagement, is the eye of the needle through which a developmental practice, and the developmental practitioner, must pass. The question such a practice asks of us is, surely, whether we are serious about our humanity, or not.

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