

Rethinking Development

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Development conveys a sense of 'improvement' or 'bettering' one-self or one's community or country.

Popular understandings of what it means to be 'developed' are linked to ideas of modernity, industrialisation and progress where the West is seen as the ideal.

Ideally, development should ensure a minimum level of happiness for all.

Talk of development today inevitably involves a discussion of globalisation, especially economic globalisation.

Economic globalisation is underpinned by the idea of economic liberalisation, which is characterised by reducing or even removing state involvement in regulating financial and capital markets and barriers to trade.

The primacy of the market is at the core of this orthodoxy.

Economic growth is equated with development and the idea is that more growth would result in happiness.

This definition of happiness is based on premise that although scarcity is natural and human needs are unlimited the contradiction could be resolved through competition and market principles.

These are the very assumptions that are now under debate.

There has been evidence over the years that the idea of more being always better wasn't quite working. This era of unparalleled growth has also been marked by increasing levels of inequity within society.

Enclaves of affluence, privilege, prosperity and consumption are surrounded by poverty, degradation, hardship and misery both in the global north and south.

For instance, while there is a serious problem of food security facing the poor and unacceptable numbers of people go hungry every day, the World Health Organisation has declared obesity to be a global public health crisis.

There is also evidence that the growth ideology is having disastrous effects on the environment and the very survival of the planet. Worsening natural disasters, unpredictable weather patterns, new and dangerous epidemics are indications of the fragile state of the ecology.

Finally and perhaps most dangerous of all, is the erosion in the popular belief and confidence in the righting of wrongs or making the world a better place along with increasing levels of cynicism and lack of faith in political processes.

For instance, the reaction to the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai was overwhelming public anger towards politicians and the political system.

Justified as this anger may have been, it also shows a lack of belief in the possibility of change through political processes or in the belief that our elected representatives are able or willing to secure our safety and wellbeing.

The increasing incidents of terrorism around the world and the many wars raging around the world are an indication of the lack of global security.

The situation in Sri Lanka presents a microcosm of what's going on in the rest of the world.

Sri Lanka too has been gripped by a civil war for over two decades now. We have been prone to extreme weather fluctuations and natural disasters; our forest cover and water resources are being depleted.

An Asian Development Bank report in 2007 has shown that increase in inequality between the richest and the poorest in Sri Lanka has been among the most rapid in Asia. This indicates that although Sri Lanka has been successful in achieving economic growth over the last couple of decades we have singularly failed to ensure that the fruits of that economic growth have been equitably distributed.

One of the hallmarks of the economic ideology that has dominated the world recently has been its sense of inevitability. However disastrous its impact, its proponents insist that there is no alternative.

One reason for this has been the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of any alternative to this market driven model (although the last few years have seen an increase in practical alternatives especially in Latin America).

Another has been the not inconsiderable amount of money that has been poured into promoting and propagating neo liberal ideology throughout the world by neo-conservative institutions for example, such as the Adam Smith Institute in the UK and the Heritage Foundation in the USA.

These institutions have been responsible for sponsoring global conferences and forums such as the World Economic Forum ostensibly to present 'neutral' opinions from economic experts and have been quietly engaged in providing ideological support for politicians and promoting economic and political theory so that alternative theories and models are either suppressed or marginalised.

Conservative media have also supported the spread of such ideology. One well known news organisation, FOX, owned by the magnate Rupert Murdoch is notorious in this regard.

However, the global financial and now economic crisis has damaged the aura of neo-liberalism. While its die-hard supporters may try to salvage some vestige of respectability from its bloody remains, public faith has been shaken in the power of free markets, deregulation and minimum state intervention in the economy.

Thus, the search for alternatives is more urgent than ever. Instead of a purely economic growth focused development ideology, a social justice perspective offers us some alternatives to the manifold issues of today.

A social justice approach calls attention to issues of marginalisation, discrimination and disempowerment and it focuses on ensuring equity of material, cultural, social and political resources.

Such an approach recognises the intrinsic value of human beings, acknowledges the importance of social relationships and bonds in people's lives, and recognises that values and relationships are framed within a cultural context.

In contrast, development as we have experienced recently regards human beings as instrumental, erodes social relationships, imposes cultural hegemony, and deepens levels of inequity in the access to resources.

This idea of social justice pre-supposes some stable form of political order, community or society within which its values can be institutionalised and realised.

The site of redistributive justice was traditionally considered to be the nation state but this is now much maligned.

Furthermore, global institutions such as the World Bank, World Trade Organisation and International Monetary Fund have weakened the capacity of the state to achieve social justice goals.

The contemporary challenge is to find the means of calling attention to issues of marginalisation, disempowerment and discrimination.

It requires re-framing the idea of justice in terms of responsibility and accountability.

It means searching for different models and knowledge and practices that have been suppressed, disqualified and made invisible.

We need to regain a sense of solidarity that looks for commonalities that don't erase or suppress our differences.

Sri Lanka's own Constitution provides us with a framework that can support such a search for justice.

The Directive Principles of State Policy are intended to guide "in the enactment of laws and the governance of Sri Lanka for the establishment of a just and free society".

It calls for a social order in which justice (social, economic and political) will guide all the institutions of national life which includes the realisation of an adequate standard of living, the continuous improvement of living conditions and the full enjoyment of leisure, social and cultural opportunities.

It even directs government to ensure the equitable distribution of the material resources of the community and the social product to best serve the common good, the establishment of a just social order in which the means of production, distribution and exchange are not concentrated and centralised in the State, State agencies or in the hands of a privileged few, but are dispersed among, and owned by, all the People of Sri Lanka.

It specifically mentions that the State should eliminate economic and social privilege and disparity, and the exploitation of man by man or by the State.

It declares that "the State shall strengthen national unity by promoting co-operation and mutual confidence among all sections of the People of Sri Lanka, including the racial, religious, linguistic and other groups, and shall, take effective steps in the fields of teaching, education and information in order to eliminate discrimination and prejudice".

Although the Directive Principles of State Policy are not legally enforceable, they do place upon the government and its citizens a moral, ethical and social responsibility not to contravene them.

These long ignored Constitutional injunctions may be a good place to begin our search for social justice and human-centred development.