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A Primer for Promoting Deliberative Democracy and the Dynamics of Development at the Grassroots

The development assistance industry is undergoing an existential crisis. Critical books by distinguished practitioners¹ pointed to the obvious truth that “developing” countries were not developing as should be expected 60 years after the Breton Woods accords created the World Bank and IMF and formally gave birth to the industry. The implication should be that development assistance is mis-designed or at least mis-directed.

Yet since these books came out little has changed in the way that assistance is either designed or directed. Why it should be so difficult to accept that the emperor has no clothes is perhaps understandable, given all that has been invested in setting up the industry as it is. Moreover, humans resist internalizing evidence that challenges established mindsets, which we rely on to explain the world so that we can get out of bed in the morning and go to work. What we all do instead is assimilate the dissonant evidence into the existing mindset, twisting and shaping the evidence so that it leaves the mindset undisturbed. For the mindset itself resists tweaking: like a Rubik’s Cube, if you move one piece the whole connected thing falls out of kilter.

So... we shouldn’t expect those who’ve devoted their lives to the wrong way of doing foreign aid to come out and admit they’ve been wrong all along. If we need a new mindset, we should work with those whose mindset is presently being shaped and before it hardens. Hence I propose a primer for new practitioners, based on fourteen basic thoughts and a checklist.

1. Traditional “development assistance” has not worked

There is broad consensus that the outcome of development assistance as practiced over the past half century has been fundamentally disappointing. If “development” is a country’s capacity to **sustain** its own process of social and economic advancement, then development assistance efforts have failed. One only has to look around. Recipient countries are—as a rule—no more self-supporting now than they were 50 years ago. The handful of exceptions are difficult to connect to the quantity or quality of foreign aid they received.

2. Institutions matter

A decade or so ago—and after 40 years of donors building infrastructure—a realization was made that even well-designed development policies would not be effective without an adequate institutional environment to sustain them. Countries cannot function if these institutions do not. This led to programs tailored directly to provide this institutional undergirth: legal, juridical, political, economic, bureaucratic, etc. This is still valid.

3. But institutions need to be legitimized

A realization is more recently emerging that just having the institutions in place is not enough to make them operative. Programs designed for “institutional development” have themselves been disappointing. Corruption and mistrust of institutions remain

¹ See, most dramatically, Joseph Stiglitz’ [Globalization and Its Discontents](#) (WW Norton & Co., 2002) and William Easterly’s [The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists’ Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics](#) (MIT Press, 2002).

rampant even after they have been “reformed” by such programs. To operate, institutions must not only be well-designed, they must also be **seen and accepted as** trustworthy.

But that legitimacy, apparently, can be neither designed nor legislated. It arises from the institutions’ own performance, which is in turn nourished by the covenant of citizens who come to realize that they depend on them and expect them to be reliable. This self-reinforcing cycle—performance depending on trust depending on performance—happens with institutions at all levels of public life, from the national to the neighborhood. The challenge for development assistance is to find the right level at which to jump-start that virtuous circle.

4. Community-driven development is where the rubber hits the road

We’ve learned from long experience that the proper level in which to promote incipient practices of public institution-building for development is at the local level.² The evidence is compelling: the power and practicality of “public acting” is best evidenced where the effect of the action is most immediately relevant to the actors. People live at the local level; their most pressing issues are typically local. Principal donors are thus beginning to focus their efforts on creating spaces at the local level in which such acting can take place, places for people in local public life.

5. Whether to be top-down or bottom-up: that is the question

The central controversy in development assistance right now is finding the appropriate balance between interventions from the top (the “supply” of good governance, so to speak) and interventions from the bottom (the citizens’ “demand” for good governance). For more than 30 years the Inter American Foundation has worked with people at the grassroots to help them expect more from themselves and from the institutions that serve them. It works from the bottom-up in helping people build those local public spaces. It recognizes, nevertheless, the importance of efforts coming down from higher levels that offer to engineer such local spaces within a broader national framework. It does what it does best, at the bottom, while seeking coordination with top-down efforts.

6. The issue of scaling up and scaling out

As a match to macro-produced policies for public institution-building, we offer a strongly complementary notion of **self-production** (there’s a cool greek word for it: *autopoiesis*) of public life. Only the people can create their own public life, through their engagement in dealing with their own problems; this is the essence of self-governance. It is on the power of coordinated self-help practices, the “art of associating” that impressed Tocqueville in the 1830s, on which countries like America were built.

From these practices emerges an awareness of the need for institutionalized relationships. As people start assuming ownership over changing their own circumstances, they begin to discover the need for mechanisms to deal in public ways with each other within their trusted circles, with other circles like theirs, and with circles above them in the structures of power. In effect, the process of development becomes one of re-defining relationships within and between such groups. Those reformed relationships call for and support reformed public institutions to mediate them. But

² See the history of the Inter American Foundation, at www.IAF.gov.

reforming those relationships —and those public institutions— requires a public deliberative conversation.

7. Enter public deliberation: redefining civic relationships

Development is a process of collective learning to create new forms of relationships: social, political and economic. Operationally, it means re-defining notions of identity, interests, power, perceptions and stereotypes, and patterns of interaction of the groups involved.³ Social psychologists indicate that such collective learning occurs only through practice. It cannot be taught, it must be experienced. Public deliberation provides a space within which the components of civic relationships can come to play and their dysfunctional aspects become evident. The nature and difficulty of the relationship will indicate which of several techniques can be best applied in the conversation as it leads to collective action. They all share the basic premises: that the life of the *polis* is about relationships, and that these relationships can change through structured conversations.⁴

8. We need a different way to think about power

Ultimately, the core problem of underdevelopment is the unequal distribution of power. When power is evenly distributed politics and markets work more fairly and income and wealth assume fairer distributions. Yet, inversely, redistributing income will not by itself re-distribute power. North Korea probably has a flatter distribution of income than most developing nations. And we define power not only as the capacity to coerce or force, but as the capacity to make things happen. The crowds in the streets of Kiev in December 2004 showed power, yet they had no guns or tanks. Power is also the capacity to affect one's own life.

9. Such empowerment requires owning the context, the whole set of circumstances

The act of observing an isolated single phenomenon necessarily limits its interpretation, since all phenomena are contextual. The context may change in the next instant, and a second observation will produce a different result. But instead one can understand a phenomenon by understanding its underlying relationships, and surmise from them how it would behave under any given set of circumstances. One “knows” a person not because one has seen him in every conceivable circumstance, but because one knows some fundamental aspects about him that lets one anticipate how he might react under any circumstance. Likewise, when people get to know the fundamental aspects of the relationships under which they live, they acquire the power to alter those relationships and make decisions based on that understanding. That is the essence of democratic governance: people will support what they create. Such engagement thus defines political relationships and creates sustainable societies.

³ This conceptual and operational notion of “relationship” was defined in H. Saunders, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transfer Racial and Ethnic Conflicts* (St. Martin's Press, NY 1999) and H. Saunders, “A Citizen's Political Process”; *Kettering Review*, Spring 2004.

⁴ See: R. Daubon, “Dialogue for Development”, in *Kettering Review*, Spring 2004.

10. A “community” is not a place; it is the relationships that define it

Biology teaches us that we are not just the sum of our body parts, since every cell in our bodies is replaced every few weeks. We are rather the genetic instructions, the relationships that guide our personal biological process. Likewise, a “community” like a “culture” is not its picture at one instant. (In fact, it cannot be observed at one instant. When it is, the circumstances that defined that instant will have already changed.) A community is an aggregate of relationships, surrounded by constantly changing circumstances. It therefore has no shape that can describe it. Traditional development assistance is destined to fail first of all because it is designed to serve a reality which will have changed by the time the assistance reaches its destination. But more significantly, it fails because it is directed at the circumstances and not at the relationships that generate the circumstances. Development assistance is thus designed to treat symptoms, not the malfunctions that generate them.

11. A democratic community can adapt to circumstances

A democratic community controls its ways of relating and can therefore direct change. It can adapt to changing circumstances around it to either protect itself or take advantage of them. An autocratic community or a dependent community, on the other hand, does not control its own cultural change. It therefore has trouble adapting to a changing world. Democratic communities will therefore be better prepared to take advantage of the opportunities of globalization and protect themselves from its pitfalls.

12. A democratic community is a deliberative community

More than a system of government, democracy is a practice, a way of life. It is the capacity of a people to deal constructively with its tensions so as to make and carry out decisions. Democracy requires the interaction of all of a community’s voices, a *public* Public deliberation invites and allows those voices to be heard and considered. It is not a one-time affair; it is the constant interaction between citizens and the construction—bit by bit—of a shared discovery of each other’s legitimacy. Advocacy, speaking out for one’s position and questioning the others’, may come later; but deliberation is listening to all positions and questioning one’s own. A combination of dialogue and deliberation⁵ thus highlights the interactions of the community—good and bad—and opens the system to control its own dynamics. The flaws and differences between the voices become evident and can then be changed. We can then invent a community (or a country) that otherwise could not have been imagined.

13. The greatest generator of information is openness.

Ideally, democracy should be a collective brainstorm. Democracy, like markets, works best when there is free information and a rough equivalence of power among the parties. The imagined polity will come not from its leaders but from the endless cacophony of its people. No one alone could have imagined America today; it evolved

⁵ Both conversations make the same basic assumptions mentioned above: that the life of the *polis* is about relationships and that these relationships can change thorough structured conversations. *Deliberation* presupposes a community coherent enough to deal with a shared problem, even if contentious; *sustained dialogue* presupposes a level of tension that precludes a collective “we” and compels dealing with the dysfunctional relationship before specific problems can be addressed. See Saunders (2004) op cit.

over centuries amidst the tensions of its voices. But democracy—and therefore development—are unpredictable and messy. Its sustainability relies precisely on its openness and its unpredictability. We must therefore develop a tolerance for the unforeseen. Planning, on the other hand, is orderly and consequent ...and rarely works as “planned”.

14. But this is just a theory...

There is always a theory. What we call development “practice” is based on the theory of six decades ago. It stated that the wealth of nations was based on endowed resources (Luxemburg’s?). That a history of backwardness was destiny (Ireland’s?). That infrastructure was determinant (remember East Germany?). That human capital made all the difference (Czechoslovakia?). That countries could plan their development (the Soviet Union?). The theory stated that poverty could be alleviated if the needs of the poor could be properly assessed and diagnosed by experts. It said that if the poor were given credits and training and technical assistance their lives would be made better. But the poor don’t just want their lives to be “better”: they want to stop being poor. Furthermore, they don’t just want things; they want a sense of power over their lives so that they can procure their own things.

We know what happened. Sixty years of practice under that theory has little to show for its effort. A relative handful of the poor have better lives...but they are still poor. And there are more poor now, in absolute and relative terms, than six decades ago. Because poverty is not the lack of things; it is the lack of power to change the circumstances that generate the lack of things. And those circumstances remain—in essence—unchanged. But the required power cannot be simply given to the poor; it has to be encouraged and resourced. The poor must discover themselves the means to assert their legitimate voices with all the other voices of a democratic community. If the poor need help it is to articulate their voices to participate in constructing their own agendas. We believe that development assistance can help.

We thus suggest an alternative, based on openness and democracy, on the transparency of markets, and on people assuming the power and the responsibility to govern themselves.

15. So, here’s a checklist for donors and activists for *a citizens’ political process*

- a. Who IS and who is NOT in the conversation? The more diverse the conversation, the more complicated it will be. The more complicated, the richer the options. The richer the options, the more the choices. The more the choices, the better the decision. A diverse, complicated conversation will therefore be much harder and conflictual, but it will generate more knowledge and will produce a more solid commitment to the agreements that are made, no matter how unimportant they may initially appear. Those small, committed agreements, few at first and later by the thousands and millions, will form the bedrock of sustainable governance.
- b. Look for themes and patterns rather than causes and problems. Look for the simple underlying pattern and the clear organizing principle beneath the surface complexity. Focus on relationships—economic, social and political—and their components: identities, expressions of authority and

power, interests, perceptions and stereotypes, and patterns of interaction of the groups involved.

- c. Trust the power of the organizing principle and let it loose: combine some expectation of acceptable behavior with the freedom available to individuals to assert themselves in unplanned ways.
- d. Give it time. Simple-minded ideas are designed quickly, even when they are complicated. Lasting ones, even if simple, must emerge at their own pace.
- e. Plan the global, but let the local free. Everywhere in nature, order is maintained in the midst of change because autonomy exists at local levels. A system can manage the global demands for change when it has built into it internal freedom of motion at the local level.⁶ The local level shouldn't be waiting for instructions, but rather constantly innovating, guided by a shared organizing principle of self-reference—not knowing where its next step is.

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⁶ See: Robert. Nisbet, The Quest for Community , Oxford University Press (1990).