

Qualitative Dimensions of Social Development Evaluation*

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“Today for the first time the tribal labourers of this area are going on strike, stopping work on their own initiative. This may result in a wage rise of say Rs. 100 per year or Rs. 50 per year.- What is important to us, however, is that we are asserting that we too are human beings”.

(Ambarsingh Suruwanti, a tribal labour leader in Maharashtra, India, 1 May 1972)

Introduction

Although the subject of this conference concerns 'projects and programmes in the Third World', this paper offers thoughts towards an overall orientation on the question of qualitative dimensions of social development, at the grass roots as well as at higher levels. It is argued that, keeping in view the considerations presented in this paper, actual indicators for evaluating social development in any specific project or programme must be developed in the concrete context of the project or programme's specific objectives, its socio-economic context and the people's culture. Furthermore, any evaluation will be developed by the project community, i.e. the people concerned and others who will have a responsibility for implementation. Project and programme evaluation is considered also to be a learning process for the project community, and indicators should be subject to progressive refinement or modification as experience is gained and ideas develop. Finally, there is no reason why the concern for social development and its evaluation should be restricted to the Third World.

Social science and development cooperation have had an overwhelming bias towards quantitative indicators for assessing developmental progress. This has been unfortunate, and has generally given a distorted approach to development policy and action. Imagine the development of a human child to be assessed in terms only of indices such as his or her physical health, grades in school, and

eventually his or her financial earnings. A 'well-developed' person in such terms may very well be a social nuisance and/or a very miserable person, even in a reasonably normal social environment. It is perfectly natural and valid to want to see one's child develop as a wholesome human personality, making a comfortable but not necessarily lavish living, able to handle life's tensions without cracking, developing creative faculties of social value, emotionally content with life, loved by family and friends, and held in broad respect by the wider society. Most such indicators of personal development are not quantitatively measurable, but they may nevertheless be at the core of enlightened human aspirations, for oneself as well as for one's children. There is no reason why, for society or communities of people, the notion of development should be very different, and should take a narrower, predominantly quantitative, view, leaving out vital considerations which can be assessed by analytical reasoning if they cannot be measured by numbers.

Popular needs and priorities: some examples

One may ask whether for materially poor communities the question of access to the so-called 'basic needs', i.e. food, clothing, shelter, education and health care, are not of overriding importance so as to constitute the core indicators of progress which are quantifiable anyway. I have often sought to test this question myself, on various occasions, in dialogues with poverty groups who have become mobilised for collective struggle and endeavors to improve their lives. Some have, indeed, indicated a bias predominantly oriented towards 'basic needs' in expressing their aspirations, although it has often appeared that they are repeating what they are being told by some quarters. I have also heard people say that they did not know that they were 'poor', before they were told so. But there have been others who have responded differently.

For example, in a dialogue with leaders and cadres of the Bhoomi Sena movement in Maharashtra, India (de Silva *et al.*, 1977), there arose the question of why bonded labour was selected as the first issue to be tackled. The reply was, 'It was a question of human dignity. The reason was not economic only.' One could argue that the question of bonded labour itself, in any case, could be handled quantitatively. But human dignity is affronted in many other ways, with

various modes of personal and social humiliation including physical humiliation, sexual abuse, and outright assault, backed by the social status and the power of the offenders.

There are numerous organised groups of disadvantaged people around the world who are struggling not only for economic rights, but also for human rights. I had a most revealing experience in Bangladesh, when an assembly of organised landless rural workers' groups who had been struggling for economic and other rights for about eight years without any significant gain in their economic status asserted that their lives nevertheless had changed, and that they would never give up their organisation because, "the elites have to talk to us with respect now that we are organised" (Rahman 1986). In times of flood-stricken distress other groups have expressed similarly: "If they cannot give us wheat, OK, but we shall not accept the abuses. They must treat us as human beings..." (Rahman 1987). Furthermore, groups of very poor rural women who became organised stated that one of the greatest gains to them from organising had been the opportunity and ability they gained just to talk in public, and as a result they tried to attend every meeting to share their problems and seek solutions. This they did both to gain some freedom and to experience a sense of solidarity with other women, in an environment where customarily they stayed in and around their immediate families and did not have the right to speak in the presence of an adult male, except close relations. For this experience alone they considered that the development of their organisation had constituted a profound change in their life (Rahman 1987).

More poignant was the rejection of an elitist notion of 'development' by a number of forest-based poor people's movements in India, after a process of joint reflection on their status:

"... We have seen and we have tried to present the picture of degradation of our culture ... The life of a forest-dweller has many compensations which are not available to city dwellers ... For 'development' we have to give up our life style and our culture and ... we are gradually imbibing the culture and life of the slums ... We feel cheated ... It is strange that what is good for us has been decided by those who have cheated us and the

country. They have deprived us of our habitat and the country of her environment ... Those who are interested in a new forest policy are not the forest-dwellers. Their major interest is the development of forest as a resource, rather than as a habitat of the people. This basic difference distinguished 'us' from 'them'. They believe that we (the forest dwellers) should reap the dubious benefits of 'development'. Or, in other words, become like them or their serfs. We have tried in this report to show how we have lived for centuries - sheltered, protected and nurtured by the forest. This lifestyle is now fast disappearing along with the forest..."

(Dasgupta 1986, chapter 6)

A different dimension of people's self-assessment of progress was revealed in an evaluation of a project in the Philippines which provided animation work to promote organisations of various categories of rural workers in four villages (Rahman 1983). The organisations were engaged in collective activities which brought economic gains in different degrees to their members. A random sample of the members of these organisations were interviewed, and people were asked what was the most important benefit they had gained by organising. Without exception, every one of them replied 'education' - the gaining of knowledge, through actual experience, that they could improve their status by organising and working together, was the single most important benefit they had gained. No one, even out of those whose economic status had improved substantially, mentioned economic gain as the most important.

More such examples could be given of people's perceptions of 'progress' or 'development'; perceptions and priorities in terms of dimensions of life which are not readily quantifiable and are yet of profound value to the people. But let us end this section by recalling the following revealing observation in a discussion of the ORAP movement (Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress) in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe:

Significantly, the translation of the concept of development into Sindebele (local language of Matabeleland) is 'taking control over what you need to work with'. The names of most ORAP groups also reflect these concerns. A few chosen at random are: Siwasivuka (We fall and

stand up), Siyaphambili (We go forward), Dingimpilo (Search for life), Sivamerzela (We're doing it ourselves), Vusanani (Support each other to get up) ... (Chavunduka et al., 1985)

As I have observed elsewhere (Rahman 1989), in apparently naive words these expressions of people's collective self-identity reflect deep conceptualisations of popular aspirations. Hence they reflect implicit popular notions of 'development'. The people want to stand up, take control over what they need to work with, to do things themselves in their own search for life, to move forward, supporting each other. These are as much part of their 'basic' needs as the 'basic needs' of conventional development thinking. These are holistic needs or aspirations, which cannot be quantified without distorting their basic spirit.

Finally, when I recently visited a relatively well-off village in Hungary after fall of the Berlin Wall and asked villagers of their experience with so-called 'socialist development', members of the community told me that 'what hurt most is the indignity of being forced to vote for a chairman who I know is corrupt'. This indignity is a measure of one's poverty, notwithstanding one's material well-being, and a measure, therefore, of social underdevelopment.

Who assesses development?

So far this discussion has suggested that there are certain qualitative dimensions of life to which ordinary, disadvantaged or underprivileged people - whether materially poor or rich - attach considerable importance, given their specific situations and conditions of life. The basic moral of the examples quoted above is that such people have their own views about what they value in life. Their views may or may not coincide with ours, rooted as we are in a very different life with a very different evolution which has shaped our perceptions about what is valuable. In this context, when we talk about indicators of social development, quantitative or qualitative, a basic question that has to be faced concerns the legitimacy of ourselves, intellectuals and social development practitioners or promoters, sitting in judgment over what constitutes social development or not. Furthermore, how far can we go in articulating what should essentially be the prerogative of the people themselves to articulate?

There is no escape from these questions. Our legitimacy in these matters may perhaps be rationalised in terms of the social power we possess, and have chosen to exercise, to try to influence the process of social development of some societies in a more participatory direction, about whose dimensions we have some visions both of our own as well as derived from our interaction with people at the grass roots. However, given that the thinking of the people themselves may not necessarily coincide with ours, the absence of an authentic people's point of view remains a serious limitation on how confidently we can determine the dimensions of social development. At best, our views must be considered tentative, subject to validation or modification by the local community. In fact, a process of empowering and enabling the people to articulate and assert, by words and by deeds, their ideas and thinking in this regard, must be one of the core dimensions of social development itself. Social development cannot begin if the people are unable to express and assert what social development means to them. This, then, is a fundamental indicator of social development in societies where such empowerment still remains a distant dream and, unfortunately, it could be argued that this is the prevalent state of affairs in many nation states today.

Elements of empowerment

A quantitative element of empowerment is control over economic resources. But progress in this matter is by itself no indication of enhanced social power of the underprivileged to assert their developmental aspirations and their freedom to take initiatives for their self-development. The essential qualitative elements of empowerment are well suggested in many writings on participatory development, from which I would highlight three:

1. Organisation of the disadvantaged and underprivileged people in structures under their own control, of sufficient strength, derived from direct numerical size and/or linking with other organisations of similarly situated people.
2. Social awareness of the disadvantaged, in terms of understanding derived from collective self-enquiry and reflection, of the social environment of their

lives and the working of its processes. The knowledge itself, and a feeling of knowing from self-enquiry, are both important in giving the disadvantaged a sense of equality with the formally 'educated' classes of society, rather than a sense of intellectual inferiority which is often a powerful force inhibiting the generation of confidence in the disadvantaged to rely on and assert their own thinking and take their own initiatives for development.

It is possible to acquire social knowledge without literacy, through methods of verbal enquiry and communication. But in many contexts not being literate amounts to surrendering power to literates, who claim knowledge which the disadvantaged cannot verify. Illiterate people depend on the literate for much information, as well as for dealings with public and other agencies which require the use of written instruments. Such dependence produces a sense of helplessness vis-à-vis institutions and structures which use the written language, and is liable to have powerful adverse effects on self-confidence in situations where relations with such institutions and structures are an important element of normal life and development effort of the people.

At the same time, the mode of acquiring literacy can have a significant bearing on the development or otherwise of self-confidence in the disadvantaged. A vertical mode of learning from conventional teachers coming from the more privileged social classes can perpetuate a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the teachers and their social classes, who are regarded as the repository of knowledge and wisdom. As the teachings of Paulo Freire make very clear, literacy, or for that matter education as an element of social development, must be viewed as an organic component of a process of 'awakening' or 'animation' (Tilakaratna 1985). This implies not merely learning, knowing and understanding, but also experiencing and grasping one's own intellectual powers in the same process; to experience, in other words, self-discovery including the discovery of oneself as a thinker and creator of knowledge. This is what makes literacy a qualitative rather than a quantitative process.

3. Self-reliance: People's power comes ultimately from self-reliance. Self-reliance is not the same thing as self-sufficiency, but a combination of material and mental strength by which one can deal with others as an equal, and assert

one's self-determination. Once again, any degree of control over material resources is by itself no indication of self-reliance, which is an attitudinal quality, inborn in some and acquired by others by social experience, social awareness, and reflection. Self-reliance is strengthened by a collective identity, deriving not only material strength but also mental strength from solidarity, sharing, and caring for each other, and from thinking and acting together to move forward and to resist domination.

Elements of organic development

Once empowered with organisation, social awareness, and a sense of self-reliance, people develop a collective personality. This development is an organic process; a question of the internal unfolding and progressive maturing of the collective. External agents may assist in this process of development; but *a people cannot be developed by others*. Some of the elements of people's development are suggested below.

Development of creativity

What distinguishes the human from other species is that human creativity is dynamic, seeking ever new forms of expression, fundamentally to fulfill a permanent creative urge; whereas other species at best create static structures (for example, a bird's nest) primarily for subsistence. The development of creative abilities and their fulfillment in economic, social, and cultural spheres is perhaps the most basic element of human development.

Institutional development

As a people's collective develops, it creates institutions and progressively modifies or recreates them in order to manage collective affairs. The quality of institutional development in the context of their respective functions is one measure of people's development. This quality may in particular be assessed from the point of view of three basic functions for which institutional development is necessary. The first is the management of collective tasks, a self-evident function. The second is mass participation in collective deliberation

and decision-making, in the implementation of collective tasks, in the taking of initiatives, in the review and evaluation of collective activities and of social progress. This is the question of internal democracy in collective development, to ensure both that activities are undertaken according to mass priorities and consensus, and that the wider body of people have sufficient opportunity to fulfill themselves by active participation in the activities of the collective. The third function, solidarity, is the one perhaps most neglected in conventional thinking. For sustained development, a collective needs to have mechanisms which will ensure that conflicts and tensions are handled without rupture; that people care for each other in distress (an internal social insurance function); and that some elements of the body do not develop at the expense of other elements so as to retard the process of development for them. There must be an agreed concern to avoid such 'mal-development', a mechanism for collective deliberation if such mal-development occurs or threatens to occur, and procedures for correcting the course.

Women's development

This cannot be overemphasised in view of the almost universal phenomenon of male development at the expense of women's development. The question is complicated by culture and religious beliefs in many situations where exogenously conceived norms of gender equality may not be appropriate. However, progress towards a position where women are able to articulate and assert their own points of view concerning gender relations in all spheres, and the evolution of gender relations towards greater equality as assessed by the women themselves, may be suggested as an important indicator of social development. For most societies this implies independent organisations for women, at least at the primary level.

Development of organic knowledge

The development of a collective human personality involves not only doing things, but also advancing simultaneously the analytical understanding of the evolving situation in all its dimensions - social, technological, political, and cultural. This is necessary for an intellectual appreciation of the unfolding

experience, as well as to establish guidelines for future action, based on systematically experienced knowledge. In most societies the task of systematically developing such knowledge has become separated from the actual evolution of social life, and has become concentrated in the hands of professionals who by and large live a life very different from the lives of the ordinary people. For social development this has created the question of the relevance of much of the knowledge thus developed, which is not rooted in people's lives, and it has also contributed to retarding the process of development of the people by undermining popular knowledge and their ability to create and advance knowledge. While professional knowledge of some kinds remains valuable for social development at certain levels of decision making, the development of self-knowledge by the people as an organic part of their life's activities - organic knowledge - is perhaps more valuable. This organic knowledge helps to develop knowledge more immediately relevant for people's self-development, as well as for sustaining people's power to assert themselves vis-à-vis other social sectors. Development of organic knowledge, therefore, must be underlined as an important indicator of social development.

Social development of the wider society

For the broader society or a development programme of macro dimensions, social development means not only that grassroots people's organisations develop in the ways suggested above, but also that society as a whole develops, revealing essentially the same kind of qualitative features on a broader scale of operation or relations. Thus, concepts of self-reliance, social creativity, institutional development, capability for the management of broader social operations, democracy and solidarity are as much pertinent for assessment of social development for the wider society as for grassroots development. From the point of view of the status of the broad masses of people in overall social development, three desirable principles may be emphasised.

Human dignity

All people are entitled to human dignity, irrespective of economic status, ethnic origin, colour, or caste. A society has little claim to have developed where some

sections can offend or abuse the human dignity of others and get away with it by virtue of their social power and position. One has not developed fully as a person, I would suggest, if one does not consider an offence to the human dignity of any person to be an offence to one's own dignity; without this basic identity with the human race one is not human oneself.

Popular democracy

At the level of institutional social discourse, an essential indicator of social development must be progress towards genuine popular democracy: a system whereby the broad masses of the people have an effective voice in the shaping of macro policy and in the conduct of public affairs. Neither the democracy of the so-called free world nor that of the so-called socialist democracies has ensured this natural right of the people. The nature of effective political parties and the outcome of electoral processes to determine macro-leadership of societies in the free world are critically determined by the distribution of economic power, and the economically underprivileged masses merely have the choice of influencing which set of privileged elites will rule over them. On the other hand, in socialist countries, albeit with greater economic equality, the Party remains typically unaccountable to the people. By one guise or another, in either type of society the real macro power remains in the hands of privileged elites. In this context, the entry of Solidarity of Poland, a truly workers' party, on to the stage of power is a unique event that opens up the possibility in at least one modern society of a real sharing of power between privileged elites and the working people. If this possibility becomes truly fulfilled, and the working people find a real voice in the affairs of the state, then the standard of attainable democracy and for that matter of macro-social development will have reached a new height, against which claims to democracy by other states, of both the free and the socialist worlds, could well be assessed.

Cultural diversity

Finally, in recent years we have witnessed an upsurge of assertions by popular sectors of their cultural identities, in opposition to attempts by dominant powers to impose a monolithic culture or ideology of development upon the people. In

debates on individual vs. collective ownership of property, it is hardly even recognised that many indigenous people do not have the concept of humans owning natural resources such as land and water. Many such communities have instead the concept of humans relating to nature as a partner in life (offering the rest of us a model for the preservation of nature for sustainable' development, rather than its destruction to satisfy the human lust for acquisition and conquest).

Conclusion

Social development, from the point of view of the broader society, necessarily implies people's development at the grass roots; otherwise only the abstract concept of the 'nation state' would be promoted, and little else would develop except structures for manipulation and repression. People's development in its turn implies development with a people's authentic culture, which itself would develop in the process, absorbing elements from other cultures with which it would interact, but which cannot develop by the imposition of alien cultures. A healthy developing society would, therefore, be a society that encourages the authentic development of people's cultures, to interact with each other for mutual enrichment, rather than for domination.

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