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Development as a gift

By Steve Sampson

Development used to be about things. We would donate a hospital, a cement factory, a new road. We decided what 'they' needed, and we gave it to them. Since there are never any free gifts, there were conditions. 'They', be it the government, or the minister, or the local community, had to say 'Thank you' in the right way. And they had to use the money for the project in an efficient way, or else, what is called 'conditionality'.

Today we don't give things any more. We give 'systems', or 'budget support'. We give a new hospital system, or improve relations between government and citizens, or support judicial institutions, or provide training for police. We formulate 'strategies', and then we support governments in their state budgets to implement these strategies. We still set conditions. And we expect that the local governments will be effective in using our gift. That they will have a feeling of responsibility about the project, called 'ownership', that they can show that they have done what they say they will do, called 'accountability', and that they can make their results visible to anyone who wants to know, 'transparency'. Instead of giving away things or roads, we now export economic reform, democracy promotion, political participation, social support for vulnerable groups, ombudsman, and human rights. We believe that if these basic social infrastructures are present, that the right decisions will be made when it comes to building hospitals, roads, schools or cement factories.

Development aid is now about systems. And behind systems lie the export of values. Values are about how we see the world. They are about how the world is, but also how the world should be. In the last decades, the values embedded in development have been made more explicit. They are values about equal opportunity for all (men, women, children, minorities). They are values that people should have more control over their own lives, whether individuals or communities. Values that people in power should be accountable through free elections and ethics. And values that private sector and markets are more efficient than large, state planned economies. There are also more subtle values, for example, that people should have the right and the possibility to choose how to live their lives, who they should marry, when to have children. And values that when there are conflicts over resources, that these conflicts should be resolved by talking and negotiating – let's sit down and talk about it! – and not by violence and killing. Development, then, is not just about programmes, or money, or building new roads or dams, or training people to operate computers. It is about convincing people that *this programme*, or *this plan* is good for them. It's about convincing people that participating in the donor's development project can help the local people get what they want. This success depends on the donor and the receiver having the same view of the world. Development – successful development -- is about values.

But what happens when our values, our understanding of what people need, does not match their own needs? Because we come with money or other resources, those who we try to help may take this money, our machines, our projects. But they turn these resources

into their own private projects. The project fails, or there is corruption. Is this just a 'conflict of values'?

In the development world, we see two views about this so-called conflict of values. One view is that 'our values and their values are in fact the same'. In this, universalist view, all cultures and societies want progress, all people want more control over their lives, all of us want more democracy, and higher living standards, even if we use a different name for it. We just have to find the right "speed" or the right "channels". Development becomes a project of finding the right "technique".

There is an alternative view, however. In this particularist view, we are criticized for exporting values that the people in developing countries simply do not have, or do not want. For example, the value of 'human rights' says that every individual, just by being born, has certain inalienable rights and that the community and the state must respect these rights and protect these people. Another value is that societies should be organized as democracies, where people who disagree can compete with each other openly through elections and opponents. Or that the best way to get what you want is to organize into voluntary associations with name, officers, regulations, annual meetings and a bank account. Or that every individual can decide for their own personal happiness that this is more important than obligations to family or community. Or simply that we should treat everyone the same, even people we do not know. Or that progress – more, better, faster – is always good. The assumption is that these values are 'the world's values'.

All these values are descriptions of the way the world OUGHT to be. And these values can be crystallized into conventions about human rights, the treatment of women, rights of minorities, the right to development, the liberalization of markets, or anti-corruption.

In this set of values, development aid is also circumscribed. Aid has to be *the right kind* of aid. We should give for example 'tools'. We should build some kind of abstract competence called 'capacity'. We should not help people, but instead let people 'help themselves'. And this aid cannot be given to anyone. It cannot be charity to anyone. They have to be 'vulnerable groups'. But we cannot give aid to groups if they are organized as families, clans, or networks, or ethnic groups. No, we should give aid to states, to ministries, to local NGOs. And we should make 'contracts' with them. These are the groups who we call 'partners'. In this way our aid is supposed to be 'effective'. It is supposed to get 'results'. And the results should be 'transparent'. Our partners are supposed to be feel good about this aid. This feeling is called 'ownership'. Development is about transfer. We transfer money, expertise, and we also transfer accounting systems. But can we also transfer values? Values of effectiveness, transparency and ownership? Two questions arise. One is technical: how do we transfer values? What is the best technique to do this. The answer is, we should find out what people need, and if people see our aid as helping this need they will take it. People in the third world wear sneakers or buy mobile telephones or play football or use computers. These items meet an immediate and obvious need. There is no 'capacity building program' to convince people that sneakers or mobile telephones are good for them. Why isn't development this easy?

What happens when people do not want what we have to offer? What happens when we give them democracy and they elect an authoritarian leader? What happens when women can go to school, but they decide to wear a burkha? What happens when our 'partners' are not 'thankful' enough for our gift? What happens when they use the money for the new water well to instead buy television sets?

Confronted with this situation, we have tried to convince people that our values are the correct values. We carry out 'awareness raising'? We help people set their 'priorities'. In the end, development aid becomes a matter of the right kind of talk, the right words, the right values, the right budget priorities, the right kind of inputs, outputs and effectiveness. What began as building dams, roads, power stations, food products and farm machines is now 'capacity building' and 'awareness raising'. What began as 'solidarity' is now 'contract'. What began as a gift, now has conditions. Until we understand these profound changes in the development landscape, we will not understand why so many development projects fail to achieve their goals.