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towards a biblical mind

What charter for humanity?

Defining the destination of 'development'

by Michael Schluter

'[G]ross national product...measures neither the health of our children, the quality of their education, nor the joy of their play. It measures neither the beauty of our poetry, nor the strength of our marriages. It pays no heed to the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our wit nor our courage, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worth living, and it can tell us everything about our country except those things that make us proud to be a part of it.'

Robert Kennedy¹

'Seek the shalom (well-being and social harmony) of the city...' Jeremiah 29:7

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Summary

The word 'development' describes a journey of economic and social change, but is often implicitly taken to define the destination as well. Economic growth is generally regarded as the purpose as well as the means of this social change. However, the biblical emphasis is on the quality of social, political, and economic relationships, which may be summarised as 'relational well-being' (RWB). National aspirations should not focus primarily on levels or distribution of income, nor on individual freedom and choice. Rather, Christians should re-examine policy and project goals in both high-income and low-income societies from a relational perspective, so as to tackle relational deprivation as well as material poverty.

What goals for 'development'?

Use of the term 'development' often begs the question, development for/towards what? It is possible to speak about 'developing' institutions such as schools, hospitals or companies so they deliver better on their stated objectives. But is it appropriate to use the term 'development' for whole nations? If so, is the implicit goal of government policy simply the production of wealth, or certain public services such as education or health? Or are these better described as intermediate goals, serving some greater purpose?

Since 1945 it has been assumed that low-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America could 'develop' to become wealthy and democratic, aspiring to the values and lifestyle of the 'developed' West. Initially, development was measured by economic growth, i.e. growth of Gross Domestic Product. In the 1970s this was broadened to include 'basic needs' (access to food, health, education, clean water). In the 1990s, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the 'Human Development Index', which focuses on three measurable aspects of quality of life: living a long and healthy life, being educated, and having a decent standard of living. 'Human development is first and foremost about allowing people to lead the kind of life they choose – and providing them with the tools and opportunities to make those choices.'²

Basu has proposed focusing on absolute income growth of the poorest 20 per cent of the population. He does not deny the importance of the larger aims of political and environmental stability, or a generally higher quality of human life. However, he argues that his indicator captures many of the other social indicators emphasised in broader notions of human development.³

Most governments today support an even wider set of objectives, the eight 'Millennium Development Goals' (target date, 2015).⁴ They include universal primary school education, promoting gender equality, reducing infant mortality, improving

1 Robert F. Kennedy, Address, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 18 March 1968.

2 'Human Development Report', UNDP, 2004, p.128.

3 Kaushik Basu, 'On the Goals of Development', in Gerald Meier and Joseph Stiglitz, eds, *Frontiers of Development Economics*, Washington DC: IDRB, 2001, p.65.

4 Shantayanan Devarajain, Margaret Miller and Eric Swanson, 'Goals for development: history, prospects and costs', World Bank Policy, Research Working Paper 2819, 2002.

maternal health and combating HIV/Aids. The most pressing goal is reducing poverty (defined as individuals living on less than \$1 a day) by half. Economic growth is still regarded as the prime instrument to pull people out of poverty. The IMF, too, focuses on the broad goal of reducing poverty: 'All developing economies need more rapid and sustained rates of growth that will in turn promote large-scale and lasting poverty reduction and rising living standards for all.'⁵

Amartya Sen, however, regards freedom as both the means and the end of development.⁶ He evaluates development in terms of 'personal functioning and capability'.⁷ 'Functioning' is what a person manages to do or be. Goods can enable functioning but are distinct from it. Sen emphasises the importance of cultural liberty (so that individuals are not constrained by their social or religious heritage), and political choice (democratic government), alongside the opportunities made available by greater access to income and education.⁸ Much development thinking is now focused on political outcomes. It is assumed that democracy always results in economic growth because it results in public accountability. Unfortunately, democracy does not guarantee social cohesion or even high levels of political participation.

In Western countries, there is growing interest in 'subjective well-being' (SWB). Increased wealth has ceased to bring greater happiness; a wider set of concerns, including health and quality of personal relationships, contribute to SWB at least as much as higher income does.⁹ With greater economic security, but fragmentation of family and community relationships, politicians are being required to focus attention on new priorities.

A cultural and religious critique

Literature on 'development' seldom takes into account cultural factors and how religious beliefs might define 'the good', or progress towards it. Before considering a Christian perspective, it is important to realise how other cultural traditions set their social priorities, and why they are critical of Western development thinking.

Africa

'Those who ignore culture are doomed to failure in Africa... An appreciation of the role of religion in African life will require some fundamentally different approaches by the international community.'¹⁰ For example, in African religious tradition there is little emphasis on individual betterment and self-fulfilment. Rather, the emphasis is on *ujamaa* (familyhood)¹¹ and *harambee* (pulling together):¹² the individual seeks the well-being of the extended family and local community rather than personal wealth.

Islam

The Islamic worldview significantly challenges Western priorities. The purists define development or progress in terms of Qur'anic ideals, a return to the Way of the Prophet, and the Islamisation of the state, which is necessary to complete the Islamisation of the individual. This may even involve economic hardship. The Islamic concept of *Umma* (the Islamic community) transcends the modern nation-state. Another approach, adopted by more pragmatic Islamists, is to define socio-economic development as 'a systematic problem-solving public policy, initiated and regulated by the state, which generates growth, but is also responsive to Islamic ethics and social justice.'¹³

Buddhism

The ultimate goal is conquest of the miseries of existence (*dukkha*); poverty is undesirable because it creates suffering. However, poverty encompasses a wider arena than purely material deprivation. A

person is regarded as poor if they do not have qualities such as faith, morality, sacrifice and learning.¹⁴ Human suffering can only be ended with the destruction of the roots of evil – which include greed, hatred and delusion. Buddhism, like Hinduism, does not comment directly on social change, technology and economics. However, 'Engaged Buddhism' is a contemporary movement of non-violent social and political activism whose roots are found in traditional Buddhist concepts such as interdependence, compassion, and meditation.¹⁵

Confucianism

Central to Confucianism is the Way (*dao*).¹⁶ Finding the Way is the ultimate meaning of human existence. Harmony is achieved when the Way of Heaven (involving a Supreme Being) and the Way of Humans (concerned with the virtue of individuals) are fulfilled in each other. This encompasses the role of government in reducing conflict, in harmony in family relationships and harmony between humans and their natural environment. Tackling poverty is important because poverty leads, via discontent, to conflict.

What might such societies look like 100 years from now? If we reflect on the dramatically different destinations of these cultural and religious traditions we realise that, contrary to Western thinking, material outcomes are not the primary social goal for billions of people. So has the dominant Western concern with economic growth become a form of cultural imperialism? Is the emphasis on personal freedom, individual human rights, cultural diversity, mobility of labour and capital (along with lack of concern to preserve family identity, ethnic cohesion and religious practice) in tune with local cultural values? And are dysfunctional families and communities, sprawling cities, ethnic tension and secularism in truth unavoidable by-products of modernisation?

Biblical teaching on social goals

The starting point of biblical teaching on national life and social organisation is the sovereignty of Christ over all creation, for 'all things were created by him and for him...and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:16). This does not allow Christians to force their views on other people, but it does authorise Christians to practise 'love' in the world, and to seek to persuade other people by example and argument (Matthew 5:19).

In terms of national goals, the focus of biblical teaching is the theme of right relationships. Christianity is a relational religion.¹⁷ God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit enjoys relationships within as well as outside the Godhead. This distinctive relational nature of the Trinity, characterised by love and righteousness, sets Christianity apart. The central significance of relationships in human society is not imposed by God arbitrarily but reflects who he is. Righteousness is not just absence of guilt through God's forgiveness, but the practice of right relationships, towards both God and humans; the essence of sin is the desire for autonomy.

Biblical teaching covers Godward and intra-family relationships but also covers other relationships such as those between citizens, across gender and age groups, between citizens and the state, between citizens and foreigners, between ethnic groups, and between nations. In a modern state, God is surely concerned about relationships between doctor and patient, shareholder and director, and between professional groups, to name but a few.

What, then, are the characteristics of right relationships? 'Justice...is the fulfilment of the demands of a relationship, with God or a person. There is no norm of righteousness outside of that personal involvement. When people fulfil the conditions imposed on them by relationships they are righteous. Every relationship has specific obligations.'¹⁸ Right relationships are characterised by justice, mercy, faithfulness, forgiveness, truth, generosity, compassion, respect, hope, patience and love; wrong or

5 Krueger, A., 'Expanding trade and unleashing growth: the prospects for lasting poverty reduction'. Remarks at the IMF Seminar on Trade and Regional Integration, Dakar, Senegal, 6 December 2004.

6 Amartya K. Sen, 'What is Development About?', in Gerald M Meier and Joseph E Stiglitz, eds, *ibid*, p.506.

7 Amartya K. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, OUP, 1999.

8 UNDP, *ibid*, pp.13ff.

9 For example, see www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_PublicationDetail.aspx?pid=225

10 African Commission Report, p.29, www.commissionforafrica.org/english/report/thereport/english/11-03-05_cr_report.pdf

11 Julius Nyerere, *Essays on Socialism*, OUP, Dar-es-Salaam, 1968.

12 A term coined by Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya to express African values.

13 Ozay Mehmet, *Islamic Identity and Development*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p.10.

14 P. D. Premasiri, 'Religious values and the measurement of poverty: a Buddhist perspective', www1.worldbank.org/prem/poverty/wdrpoverty/joburg/buddhist.pdf

15 F. Eppsteiner, *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, CF: Parallax Press, 1985.

16 This paragraph on Confucianism is taken from Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, CUP, 2000.

17 See Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds, *Jubilee Manifesto*, IVP, 2005, ch.2.

18 B. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996.

bad relationships by injustice, oppression, violence, deceit, self-centredness, lust, irritability, envy, greed.¹⁹ Biblical law rests on 'love'.²⁰

The good and bad relationships listed above shine through many aspects of OT Law. The role of the Law in part is to provide teaching on how to establish an institutional framework conducive to sustaining right relationships and 'love'. These same values characterise the social vision of the prophets, particularly Isaiah.²¹ Above all, these virtues are demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. For example, Jesus' practice of, and emphasis on, social inclusion²² echoes the emphasis of the Law on loving the alien,²³ and also echoes the teaching of the Prophets.²⁴ He fulfils the Law by showing right relationships being practised in the life of a person, and also demonstrates 'shalom' (health, tranquillity, contentment, well-being) in his response to crisis situations. No wonder Isaiah described the future Messiah as the 'Prince of Peace'.²⁵

Within this framework, the ultimate goal of society is described in biblical teaching as 'shalom', which is translated normally as peace, but includes the idea of well-being and social harmony for the nation, the community and the individual. The exiled Jews in Babylon are called by Jeremiah 'to seek the peace and prosperity (shalom) of the city' where they were exiled.²⁶ 'Shalom' is more than the absence of conflict; it is about forgiveness, the resolution of conflict, security, safety and a society at peace with itself. The only route to shalom is through right relationships (righteousness): as Isaiah says, 'The fruit of righteousness will be *shalom*'.²⁷

Although biblical law is clear enough on what brings peace for both individual and community, sadly at a personal level we each do wrong. Through Christ we can be saved from our sin and have our true, God-given nature restored. However, salvation is not simply a process of individual transformation. God's intention is that all believers should become part of Christian communities that demonstrate his values in their collective life through the power of the Spirit. This is bound to bring about social change among those touched by these communities, and may result in change at a national level where Christian communities are numerous enough.²⁸

Promoting right relationships, leading to social harmony and well-being at both a community and personal level, which I term 'relational well-being' (RWB), does not directly bring anyone into the Kingdom. However, it does contribute indirectly by preparing the ground for the gospel.²⁹ In addition, God's promise to the nation of Israel is that right relationships across society will result in successful family formation, food security, net capital outflows, trade, military security and leadership in international affairs.³⁰ Relational well-being, then, is the goal of social change, and brings political and economic benefits.

Relational well-being in multi-faith societies

The next question is this: how can Christians advance their vision of social purpose in secular, theocratic or multi-faith societies, where they are a small minority? First, Christians need to rediscover the sense of community enjoyed by the early church, and live out God's priorities for their life together in both 'political' and financial terms. We need to put our own house in order. Secondly, the challenge is to find categories and vocabulary which resonate with the wider public, of whatever religious or agnostic persuasion, and yet reflect the values and truth of a Christian worldview. Christians should not, and generally cannot, impose their views; they need to encourage debate and argue their case.

Our approach is to define the goals of society in relational terms.

One way to do this is to focus on the theme of 'relational proximity'. It relies on a shared human appreciation that quality of relationships – issues such as identity, security, self-esteem and interdependence – are key to personal well-being and happiness, and also the key to organisational and business effectiveness. Institutions such as schools and universities, hospitals, companies and financial institutions need to re-articulate their objectives in relational terms. We should also re-examine areas of personal lifestyle from a relational perspective, including how we drive our cars, the impact of television, video games and the Internet in our homes, and our approach to work, recreation and family life. A challenge indeed!

Before considering how to measure RWB, one objection must be answered. In shifting the focus away from growth of income, is there not a betrayal of the very poorest who lack even enough to eat? Surely relationships for them, at best, are of secondary importance: what matters is simply water, food and shelter. The empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Two studies of life satisfaction of slum dwellers in Calcutta found *inter alia* that 'the respondents report satisfactory social lives, rewarding family lives and a belief that they lead moral lives... While [they] do not lead enviable lives, they lead meaningful lives.'³¹ Correspondingly, in a subsequent study in Bangladesh, relationships used by poor people to secure their livelihood were found to be hierarchical, exploitative and sometimes violent.³² The pleasure of good relationships and the pain of unjust relationships matter to the destitute.

Rather than seeing food security for the poorest as the goal of social change, which would reduce all human purpose to no more than filling the belly, it should be seen as an essential precondition, alongside the ending of armed conflict. In terms of external intervention and domestic policy priorities, the first step towards achieving RWB has to be the ending of absolute poverty and armed conflict. However, to tackle these great evils it is not enough to deal only with the symptoms; their causes must be addressed as well, which brings us back to the broader goals of society.

Measuring relational well-being (RWB)

Realistic measures or indicators are needed if relational goals are to be translated into decisions governing policy priorities, project selection and resource allocation. In some respects, the *process* of selecting indicators is little different from what is currently used in the Human Development Report (HDR). For example, in the HDR, the percentage of children in primary school is used as a measure of the child's well-being. But for a relational assessment, the education level of the parents would also be needed, to evaluate the likely impact of the child's education on those relationships.

It is not possible to measure a relationship directly so as to allow interpersonal and international comparisons. However, there are two approaches to approximation: ask people to make a subjective analysis of a relationship ('On average, how does a white British person feel towards a British Asian in your neighbourhood/workplace?'), or seek a proxy measurement, such as the numbers of racially-inspired incidents of violence in British cities. Neither is totally satisfactory, but both allow inter-temporal comparisons (notwithstanding the risks of changes in the way people describe their perceptions over time, or in the way incidents of violence are recorded by the police).

Inability to measure relationships except by perceptions of individuals or by proxy indicators should not discourage use of the RWB approach. There are also problems inherent in aggregated income analysis. Production of cigarettes, bombs and poison gas all contribute to growth in GDP. If two friends pay each other to look after each other's children, there is growth in GDP – although there is no increase in care provided, and perhaps a loss in its quality.

Any measure of RWB involves assumptions as to what constitutes good or right relationships. As discussed above, in the biblical account right relationships are characterised by justice, mercy, faith-

31 Quoted in L. Camfield, K. Choudhury and J. Devine, 'Relationships, Happiness and Well-Being: Insights from Bangladesh', WeD, ESRC Research Group, Working Paper No. 14, University of Bath, March 2006, p.3.

32 *Ibid*, p.23.

19 For a list given by Jesus, see Mark 7:21–23.

20 Matt. 22:34–40.

21 See Isa. 51:1–8; 56:1–8; 58:6–14; 59:1–15; 61:1–11; 65:17–25.

22 E.g. Luke 15:1–2; 18:35–43.

23 E.g. Deut. 10:18–19; 24:14–15.

24 E.g. Isa. 56:3–8.

25 Isa. 9:6.

26 Jer. 29:7.

27 Isa. 32:17.

28 E.g. the fall in crime in British cities 1850–1900 has been attributed to the high proportion of children in Sunday Schools during that period. See Christie Davies, 'Crime and the Rise and Decline of a Relational Society', *Relational Justice*, Waterside Press, Winchester.

29 Matt. 5:13–20.

30 Deut. 28.

fulness, forgiveness, truth, generosity, compassion, respect, hope, patience and love. Below is a list of key relationships and examples of possible indicators:

Relationship issue	Indicator
• Intra-family trust/commitment	Marriage rate, divorce rate, birth rate, levels of household debt.
• Social isolation of older people	Number of contacts per week, percentage who feel lonely.
• Workplace relationships	Extent of absenteeism and pay differentials within organisations.
• Gender relations	Incidence of domestic violence/rape/prostitution, hits on pornographic websites, gender ratio at different educational levels.
• Intra-community relations	Crime levels, proportion knowing names of neighbours, incidents of vandalism, percentage drug addiction, suicide rate.
• Inter-racial/ethnic relations	Incidents of racial/ethnic violence, comparative income/education levels.
• International relations	Aid (including private charity) as proportion of GDP, levels of carbon emissions, flow and treatment of migrants, cost of a visa.

In addition, gross inequalities in income, assets, education or access to healthcare can be measured; they are symptomatic of an injustice that makes it difficult to achieve social harmony. These different indicators cannot be aggregated into a single index by which to rank countries. Some countries excel in one area, others in another. It is unlikely that any country or region will be able to claim they are 'ahead' on all indicators.

Intermediate goals

To some, seeking to define the goals or ends of society in terms of values such as justice, mercy and forgiveness seems too abstract. They prefer the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (see p.1) such as universal primary education and reducing infant mortality. However, in a relational framework MDGs are intermediate goals: for example, universal primary education stands between the means (financial provision) and the ultimate goal (right relationships).

Thus, universal primary education may contribute to RWB (the ultimate goal) by increasing understanding of other races and ethnic groups, and broadening children's ability to help people in need around them. It is likely to reduce disparities in opportunities for employment between rich and poor, and thus contribute to people's sense of justice in society. For Christians, it helps them read the Bible and strengthen their relationship with God. However, universal primary education may also undermine RWB. It may lead children to think of themselves as autonomous individuals who have a right to pursue 'freedom' regardless of others' welfare. Through the history syllabus it may feed racial or ethnic hatred, and make group-level forgiveness harder to achieve. It may promote bitterness towards wealthy elites rather than constructive approaches to achieving economic justice. Hence the need to orientate education towards the

ultimate goal of right relationships.

There are many other intermediate goals, including a fair criminal and civil justice system, longer life expectancy, strong family and community networks, high levels of civic participation, and good industrial relations.

Consequences of defining development's destination

- Policy is still about hard choices. Not only are there choices between alternative relationship priorities, but also choices among alternative means to pursue those priorities.
- Within a relational framework, the West is not more 'developed' than countries in Africa, Asia or Latin America. On many key indicators, such as the length of marriages or social inclusion of older people, lower-income countries score more highly than high-income countries like Britain.
- International donors and Christian NGOs should consider adopting relational analysis of policies and projects rather than accepting the materialistic agenda of a purely economic world-view.³³ International co-operation should be based on relationships between countries where each helps the other to tackle areas of relational or financial deprivation.
- We cannot set aside the priority of meeting the physical needs of those living in absolute poverty, whether those needs are for food, healthcare or justice. However, it does suggest seeing such poverty as an expression of relationship breakdown between rich and poor, whether within a society (as in the story of Dives and Lazarus)³⁴ or in the global community.
- Should Christians use the word 'development' at all? Generally, the words 'developing' and 'developed' are used as a description of rich and poor, in which case it would be more appropriate to refer to 'high-income' and 'low-income' nations. This would avoid the nuance of cultural superiority in the word 'developed'.
- How can a movement towards or away from values like justice, mercy, faithfulness and truth be described appropriately? Countries might be labelled as 'progressing' or 'regressing', or perhaps as 'converging' or 'diverging' in relation to these values. What is certain is that a different underlying paradigm of social change will need different vocabulary to express it, as well as different institutions to embody it. New wine needs new wine-skins.

The second part of this paper (due March 2007) will examine reform priorities to achieve the relational goals set out here.

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³³ For details of some tools for relational analysis, see www.relationshipsfoundation.org
³⁴ Luke 16:19-31.

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