Is There A Right To Development?

Alberto Melo, University of the Algarve, Portugal

Such is the title of the communication I was asked to present to you this morning.

Well, it has **two main terms**. Logically, the very first thing to do is to analyse these two concepts.

Firstly, **what is a right?** Looking up in a dictionary this is defined as a moral or legal **claim** to have or get something or to behave in a particular way. For a person to have rights, legally recognised and enforced by the organised society, it means to be entitled as **a citizen**, and not being a serf or a slave. And this is a relatively new concept in the History of Humankind. Its foundation and evolution runs in parallel with the shaping of democracy. Despite some brief and confined historical moments when the issue of rights was raised, it is commonly accepted that human rights, as a universal prerogative that belongs to all and every human being, emerged with the French Revolution.

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human rights. The **second generation** concerns the so-called **political rights** that entitle all citizens to act within the sphere of politics, by voting, standing as a candidate, joining and being active within a political party, etc. The **third generation** refers to the **social rights** and these were constructed and materialised (although in a very asymmetrical way) during the 20th century: the rights to ensure everyone reasonable living conditions, by means of a remunerated employment, education, health care, accommodation, etc. And, more recently, there are hints of a **fourth generation** of rights that would empower every person to play a gradually active role as citizen, within a legal framework of participatory or deliberative democracy.

In legal terms, whenever there is a right there should be a correlated, reciprocal duty, that is, the responsibility to ensure that such a right can be expressed and will be concretely materialised. It has been **the State**, seen as the politically organised society, the institution responsible for the actual implementation of its citizens' rights. Consequently, both evolutions, that of rights and citizenship and that of the democratic State, have run concurrently.

It is clear that an eventual right to development, bestowed on every person, would be included within the social rights. Now, this is precisely the cluster of rights that is currently the sitting-target of **neo-liberal** ideology and policies, in their design to reduce the State role to the courts, police and army areas while opening all other domains – at least the profitable ones – to private enterprise.

A first answer to the initial question would, therefore, be a definite "**no**". No State would today fully support a right to development (seen as fulfilling all necessary prerequisites to wellbeing) to every citizen. Furthermore, if we enlarge the notion of rights from the individuals to collective entities, such as groups, regions, countries or even continents, we cannot see any political institution able to, or capable of, guaranteeing such a right.

Now, the question at stake cannot be dealt with without further analysing the second concept, that of "**development**". What is development, then?

This concept, originally coined in Biology, has been transposed into Economics and transformed in the great **ideology** of modern times. The American President, Harry Truman, used it in order to announce a new era to the world, by promising every people and nation around the world the possibility of catching up with the living levels of the United States of America. On the 20th of January 1949 his speech on

the state of the Union included the following statements:

"(…) I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development. Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power (…) With the cooperation of business, private capital, agriculture, and labor in this country, this program can greatly increase the industrial activity in other nations and can raise substantially their standards of living.
(…) The old imperialism–exploitation for foreign profit–has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. All countries, including our own, will greatly benefit from a constructive program for the better use of the world's human and natural resources. Experience shows that our commerce with other countries expands as they progress industrially and economically. Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge (…)".

Development has been **equated to growth**, from its very beginnings. Since the early 50's the global economic growth in each decade has equalled or exceeded the world economic growth from year zero until 1950. In the last 100 years, the world population has trebled, the wealth produced multiplied by 20, the energy consumed by 30, the amount of industrially manufactured artefacts by 50… And yet, according to conventional economists (and, consequently) to main politicians, constantly increasing the national growth rate is more than ever the crucial target of all societies. Such an increased rate only means that every country has to show year after year a higher Gross Domestic Product. But what does a **GDP** express? The market value of all final goods and services exchanged within a country in a given period of time. In practical terms, just the sum of **all transactions in money** that took place during one year: the relative degree of conversion to money of all goods and services that people have exchanged. Now, the more one country spends, the costlier one society becomes, and the more advanced it is supposed to be. And this indicator includes all sorts of expenses, those which actually meet human needs, but also all those, private and public, costs required to counteract the negative effects of modern economy on social and territorial cohesion, on the environment, on human health, etc.

As President Truman said, pushing everyone (and that means 6 billion people) up to the level of consumption of the average citizen of the United States is, in fact, the implicit message of development theories and policies. Now, the American average citizen consumes everyday the equivalent of his or her own weight: 18 kilos of petrol and coal, 13 kilos of other minerals, 12 kilos of vegetable matter, 9 kilos of other products, which amounts to a daily 52-kilo consumption. In this way, 4% of the world population uses up 25% of the whole energy and strategic resources, while being responsible for a quarter of the total pollution in our planet. Together with the United States, other so-called developed countries, as well as the rich minorities in the remaining countries, that is, around 1 billion people (or 1 in 6 of the world total population) are responsible for the use of 2 thirds of the main metals, 3 quarters of the energy and most of the forest resources, while producing 2 thirds of the factors that bring about the greenhouse-effect. These **over-consumerists** own 85% of the world income.

Despite the predominant place that the economy has taken in the political discourse or in the mass-media, successive opinion surveys on the main concerns of the European population, amongst others, have ranked economic problems (relating to employment, levels of consumption or material comfort) no higher than 5th to 8th. Which shows that this economic obsession is not geared to the essential needs of people but to other interests. Also, the well-known market research / public opinion survey firm Yankelevich, Skelly and White, of New York and Stamford, found that 80% of the American population are interested in developing better self-understanding through the inner search for meaning.

Obviously those interested in putting the economy, the material progress, the growth rate, in a word – money – at the core of society and of peoples' lives are not the ordinary individual, the common people, but exactly those who possess or manage most of the existing money, who are always concerned and busy in making their money generate more money. As a result, 1.2 trillion dollars are exchanged every day with mainly speculative purposes: money and real economy have now widely diverged. By the way, do you know the story of the trouser traders? A certain merchant, let's call him "A", contacts "B" and offers a 1,000 pairs of trousers for 1,000 dollars. Deal is made and "B" manages to sell the same package to "C" for 2,000 dollars, and these exchanges go on and on until "G" comes back to "F" in a furious outburst: "You are a cheat, a thief, you sold me 1,000 pairs of trousers for 6,000 dollars and they only have one leg!". "My son – says "F" in a patronising tone – you don't understand business at all; these are not trousers to wear, these are

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trousers to sell and buy, sell and buy…". Here we can find a very good example of the essential difference between Real Economics ("the utility value" and Finance ("the exchange value").

It is becoming increasingly clear that the thesis that claims the evolution of the economy and all societies to the present state of blatant irrationality and dangerous instability to be natural and inevitable is in fact unacceptable and totally unfounded. How can a physically limited system such as our planet support an endless process of **material** growth?

The nature and the rate of the recent economic growth has caused dramatic negative effects, namely in social and environmental terms. Worldwide, social and economic inequality has never been higher and is still on the increase. Manfred Max-Neef has estimated that all the physical destruction caused by all known wars in the history of Humankind is nothing to compare with the global devastation carried out since the 50's under the banner of "progress" or "development". Even so, in order to overcome all the social and environmental problems engendered by development, politicians and economists alike have only one answer: promote more development… And the dominant ideology claims that development is good for everyone. Thanks to the "trickling effect", if a person or a group becomes richer, then the rest of society is supposed to also benefit and prosper. Alas, statistics reveal that modern development runs together with a soaring inequality among people, among regions, countries, continents… The benefits of development are not reaped by everyone, not even by a majority. Given the globalisation of finance and economy, it has been estimated that no more than **9 million** people out of the 6 billion now inhabiting the planet are the actual beneficiaries of the present system: those who own, and/or heavily invest in, bank, insurance companies, pension funds, investment institutions… Furthermore, as development became the main objective of practically every Nation-State, this dominant ideology has also helped to impose and legitimate political, technocratic and bureaucratic elites around the world, a most effectual obstacle to the implementation of the often advertised "learning societies".

Development is an ideology and a practice of power, domination, conquest. In his memoirs, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, John Perkins tells of his own inner journey from "willing servant of empire" to impassioned advocate for the rights of oppressed people. Covertly recruited by the United States National Security Agency and on the payroll of an international consulting firm (Chas T. Main), he describes how as a highly paid professional, he helped the U.S. cheat poor countries around

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the globe out of trillions of dollars by lending them more money than they could possibly repay and then take over their economies. His job was to implement development policies, generally backed by the World Bank, that promoted the interests of the U.S. corporatocracy (a coalition of government, banks, and corporations) and led those countries to increasing indebtedness while professing to enhance modernization and alleviate poverty. Perkins writes, “The book was to be dedicated to the presidents of two countries, men who had been my clients whom I respected and thought of as kindred spirits – Jaime Roldós, president of Ecuador, and Omar Torrijos, president of Panama. Both had just died in fiery crashes. Their deaths were not accidental. They were assassinated because they opposed that fraternity of corporate, government, and banking heads whose goal is global empire. We Economic Hit Men failed to bring Roldós and Torrijos around, and the other type of hit men, the CIA-sanctioned jackals who were always right behind us, stepped in”.

Rather than a “right to development”, what we have nowadays is a “**compulsion** or coercion to development”.

Financial institutions, namely the World Bank, provide funding for infrastructure, which in turn provides vast profits to Western firms and, more often than not, huge bribes to local decision-makers. To pay off these debts, developing countries are compelled to direct their economy towards exporting their natural resources, a process that brings about disastrous social, economic and ecological effects. As Ivan Illich often said “development means **programmed poverty**”.

Today, Brazil has to apply 55% of all income from exports just to service (i.e., to pay interest) its international debt. Every year the whole of the Third World countries are paying the North the equivalent of 3 Marshall Plans (the investment fund that supported Europe’s and Asia’s reconstruction after World War II). Development was supposed to eradicate poverty. It actually destroyed a great deal of means of human subsistence all over the world, thus creating wide and deep misery.

Groucho Marx used to say “I worked my way up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty”. We could almost say the same with regard to the outcomes of development: at present, an estimated 1.3 billion people live on less than 1 dollar per day, while almost half of the world’s 6 billion population have no more than a 2-dollar daily income. By the way, European cows receive a grant of over 2 dollars a day and their maintenance requires a whole area 7 times larger than Europe to be intensely cultivated.

The whole process of progress, of growth, of development has dramatically affected the living conditions of the world population. Generally speaking, the price that the majority has paid in order to have an opportunity to accede new (or newly remunerated) services or goods amounts to a substantial, sometimes deadly, **loss of autonomy** regarding their time, their residence, their way of managing personal, family and work lives. The former artisans or farmers were thus forced to become factory workers or wage-earning employees, during their own lifetime or through their children. “Development” means above all **the capacity to produce internationally accepted money**. In order to yield such money, individuals and countries are forced to aim their productive activities, not at meeting local needs, but at exportation. Consequently, they lose their hand-to-mouth or subsistence economies and are doomed to helplessness and starvation. Original farms were gradually replaced by vast “open-roofed food factories” as the former self-sustaining farming families were made to emigrate to the immense slums now mushrooming around the big cities of the world.

To illustrate the actual existence of, at least, two economies and the crucial differences between them, I would like to tell you another short story, that of the “Mexican hat”. A shopkeeper in New York happens to visit a remote village in Mexico and there he finds a beautiful straw hat that he buys for 25 cents and brings to the shop where he puts it on sale for $5. It is immediately bought and numerous customers come to shop and ask for a hat like that. So, he decides to make a second visit to the village and orders 10,000 similar hats from the local artisans. They ask him to wait and after lengthy debates within the village they come up with an answer: “yes, we can produce that amount of hats within a year, but instead of 25 cents a-piece it will cost you $25 each”. “What – exclaims the astonished American – what about the scale economy? The more I order the cheaper it should cost!”. “No, Sir, if we all stay all our time in making hats, then, we have to buy all that food that we now grow here, and to buy all services that today we freely exchange; we have to travel to the nearer town to find all that we will need for our daily living: our cost of living, our need for money, will easily multiply by 100!”.

Development, as it is designed and practiced by the dominant powers, can be seen as just another aspect of the warfare that has pervaded the history of the human kind, whereby a few individuals, groups or countries try to assert their power over the others. A process of domination that has been known as “**colonisation**”. This has been going on for centuries, under different flags: religion, civilisation, progress and modernisation, and nowadays development or economic growth. It should be

quite revealing to recall that in Portugal, during the 40's and in order to promote a radical change in land use, mainly by cramming the existing commons with new forestation and by replacing subsistence farming with mechanised agricultural enterprises, the government created the "Junta of Internal Colonisation"…

When in the late 19th century, the British governor, Sir Stamford Raffles was travelling to Singapore, he stopped by an Indonesian island and met local tribes who lived very autonomously, thanks to an indigenous palm tree that would provide them with food, drink and raw materials for housing, clothing, fishing boats, etc. "But these people are un-governable!", exclaimed the governor. There was nothing that they needed to beg from any authority or government. As a result, Sir Raffles ordered that all those trees be chopped off in order to make those tribes dependent on some external power. Nowadays, the mass-media and omnipresent publicity are sufficient as instruments to constantly create new needs and therefore ensure and aggravate the same state of dependence.

Another striking example of this state of vassalage is shown by the "Cargo Cult". During World War II, many tribes in the Polynesian islands became accustomed to the frequent visits made by US planes that usually left some food and artefacts. When the war was over and the planes stopped landing there, local groups invested all their time and efforts in building rough airstrips, bogus airports and radios (made out of coconuts and straw). The cult members built them in the belief that such forged structures would again attract aircraft full of cargo. Believers also stage "drills" and "marches" with twigs for rifles and military-style insignia and "USA" painted on their bodies to make them look like soldiers. I daresay some politicians in our present times go to similar extremes in order to attract international capital and the ensuing modernisation.

While importing, willy-nilly, the concept of "progress", less industrialised countries have equally imported the concept of "**under-development**", which they have applied to themselves by comparison with the so-called advanced societies. Every poor society has then become under-developed the very moment it adopted the concept of development as designed by the masters of the world economy. At a stroke, as Gilbert Rist puts it, people are no longer Bambaras, Shona, Berbers, Quechuas, Aymaras, Balinese or Mongols, but merely "under-developed"…

In my personal view, and in relation to Education in general and to Adult Learning particularly, what we today need, more than anything, is not to amass knowledge but rather to develop our capacity to **critical analysis**, to full understanding and

also our willingness and skills to **put ideas and values into practice**. We have already accumulated a vast knowledge on so many domains, and yet social, political and no doubt ecological situations are deteriorating by the hour.

The economists Jackson and Marks devised an Index of Sustainable Welfare and found out that between 1950 and 1994, in the United Kingdom, the GDP per capita had increased 230%, but the level of Sustainable Welfare only 3%. It actually rose until 1974 but since then has systematically declined. And this fall was mainly due to the escalating costs caused by the social and environmental degradation in the country. With regard to the United States, Daly and Cobb have also shown that the welfare index has constantly risen until 1969, has then been steady for a decade or so and has dramatically worsened ever since. In fact, in a high stress, consumption-obsessed society, such as the US, real incomes have doubled in the past generation, but the percentage of the population reporting they are happy (roughly 1/3) has remained unchanged, the percentage of divorce rates has doubled, adolescent suicides have trebled…

We don’t need, and we won’t survive in, a society where all life forms (including the human one) are put at the service of the economy, instead of considering the economy as a means, among others, to maintain, reinforce and enhance life and all its multifarious expressions. Modern society, as so explicitly described by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, is responsible for a drastic process of **reductionism**: by treating vegetables like minerals, animals like vegetables and human beings like animals… There is today, as many believe, a pressing need to impose on the economy not only the principles of Ethics but equally the laws of Physics – precisely what Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen has done in the mid-70’s, when he recalled the 2nd law of Thermodynamics to demonstrate the impossibility of limitless growth on Earth.

Bhutan is a mountainous small country, with a population just over 650,000 and locked among Tibet, China and India. Since the late 80’s it has pioneered the concept and the practices of a Gross National Happiness index (GNH). **Gross National Happiness** has been the main topic for research by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, which has published in July 1999 a collection of essays. This work, by Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese authors, opened up a debate of GNH on a wider and more international scale. In January 2001, the first international seminar on GNH was held in Zeist, Netherlands, followed by another international seminar in Bhutan itself, in February 2004. This meeting aimed at three main purposes: (i) to promote the concept of GNH abroad and to create an environment in which

exchange of concepts and information about practice could take place; (ii) to involve policy makers in the discussion of GNH, with special concern for the link between the concept of GNH and the development of actual policy; (iii) to develop and explore mechanisms for the operationalisation of GNH and for practical indicators.

GNH is seen as the measurement component of an overall plan to maximise social wellbeing. The first step in developing GNH is to identify a preferred society in the greatest detail possible. This information is then used to define the relevant factors and metrics of GNH. Finally, a strategic and concrete plan for achieving GNH objectives has to be designed and implemented.

With inputs from all stakeholder groups in Bhutan, the whole picture of the "preferred society" is thus portrayed through a process that comprehensively looks at all tangible and intangible aspects of society. Goals will have to be established in areas such as education, health care, housing, clothing, food and nutrition, environment and habitat protection, parents spending time and raising children, arts, business practices, infrastructure, and others, including reported levels of happiness.

Instead of a right to development should there be a **universal right to happiness**?

The fact is that in the Western and other rich countries, the drawbacks of continuing economic growth are also revealing their increasingly high costs now borne by larger and larger sectors of the population, as well as by all other living beings and the environment as a whole. It is now quite clear that these countries, as a whole, and also the rich minorities in the poorer countries, have been living well above the sustainability level, and that the continuation of the same trend, not mentioning its reinforcement and dissemination, will have the most catastrophic consequences for the whole of the Biosphere. If the worldwide adoption of the American way of life requires 5 planets similar to the Earth (and that of the EU as a whole *only* 2.1) the only way out would today be to launch **a process of "un-development"** within the richer countries: less available money, less consumption, less productive work, more time for individual development and creative activities and for the development of meaningful interpersonal relations. This drastic change will inevitably occur, anyway, it is just a question of time. It will either be the result of a voluntary decision to slow down the pace of the money-based, money-hungry society or it will turn into a situation that will fall on us like one more (so-called

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natural) catastrophe. For instance, the investment bank Ixis-CIB published the forecast, in April 2005, that the barrel of crude would cost 380 dollars within 10 years' time (during most of the current year it has been traded at around 75 dollars and that price is already thwarting the economic growth rate…). Decision-makers would have to agree and to decide what sectors and which territories have still to grow and where and what the rate of development has necessarily to stabilise or decrease. Reducing the pace of growth, even diminishing the current level of consumption in the rich countries, amounts to no more than an attempt to come a bit closer to the life style of the majority of the world population. As a matter of fact, 80% of the human beings still live without a private car, a refrigerator or a telephone, and 94% never boarded an aeroplane…

Among multiple examples of a deliberate reduction of the consumption patterns and levels, I can here refer to the local communities (for instance, in France, the United States and Canada), for a simple living or **"voluntary simplicity"** (i.e., "living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich", Duane Elgin), the new French political party ("Parti pour la Décroissance") or the Institute for an Eco-society, in Québec. The latter has adopted the following objectives, amongst others, for its activities:

- Equitable distribution of the collective wealth and of useful work, thus ensuring that everyone will have access to a vital minimum share of goods and services, health care, education, dignity and creativity.
- Promotion of a decentralised democracy, controlled from the grass-roots and firmly grounded on the regions, the villages, the neighbourhoods, the associations, the trade unions and the economic institutions.
- Promotion of international links based on the respect for the differences and on equitable exchanges, cooperation and support to an internal accumulation of capital, economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy. Reject of the ideology of development that favours over-indebtedness, unequal exchanges and impoverishment.

As a matter of fact, the only way to resist those who today control the world because they control the money available is precisely for more and more people to cut down their need for money and the volume of money they themselves generate. This can be done, and is being done, through the reduction of useless consumption, an increase of self-production and the promotion of networks of mutual aid, free exchange of goods and services, sharing of equipment, etc.

This whole issue also presents a crucial educational nature. Some argue, and I would follow them, that the dynamic that is taking us all to a breaking point is also explained by a human identity crisis: we have allowed our fundamental human identity as “learners” to wither and thus became confined to fragmented, functional pigeon-holes such as customer, consumer, user, taxpayer, stakeholder… By adopting Freudian terms, some authors state that Humankind has recently undergone a process of collective regression towards a “breasting age”, the “id” – that is, the sum of all desires (most of them created or moulded by the ever-present publicity) – now ruling the “ego” (the conscious being). Incidentally, the Greeks had already coined a word for all those who would put their “ids” (that is how they called all material belongings) above their immaterial needs – “idiotes”…

There is no doubt, in my view, that Adult Education and adult educators should adopt the topic of the survival and wellbeing of Humankind (and survival and wellbeing of all living species on Earth) as the core of an integrated process of social action / education / research. This could be implemented through **communities of learners / activists / researchers**, following the lines of the traditional Nordic “study circles” and consciously attempting to build up new ways of understanding reality, of living together, of deciding together, of producing and consuming in solidarity and with responsibility. The issue now is how to adopt an economic and social way of living that is based, not on endless expansion but on the finite nature of the Earth, not on a self-centered competitive and short-term insight but on the assumption that all living beings are interconnected and that the fate of one affects the actual existence, welfare or survival of all the others. What we all really need is to ensure **a sustainable civilisation**, not a “sustainable development” that is nothing but an outright contradiction in terms.

“Try yourselves to be that very change that you want the whole world to adopt” – as Gandhi once put it.

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