

THE ELUSIVE SEARCH: DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS IN THE TRANSITION TO A NEW CENTURY:

A concept note

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DEVELOPMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

For most of the last fifty years, the ideological duel associated with the Cold War was accompanied by an inspiring experiment in international cooperation for development. By all current indications, that experiment, funded publicly through bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies and privately through foundations, is now drawing to a close. If it is to continue beyond the next few years, it will necessarily be in a radically different form. Minor adjustments and modifications will not reestablish the strength of the original effort.

The conception of development that was articulated, widely disseminated and financed after World War II emphasized economic growth and increases in income *per capita*. The task of development was defined in terms of achieving, in the span of one generation, the standards of living that the rich nations of the West achieved in three or four generations, but without incurring the heavy social costs that they had to pay or inflicted on others along the way. Those visions of plenty and happiness that guided for several decades the catching-up efforts of the less fortunate nations have now become blurred.

Indeed, the certainty of what it means to be "developed" --achieving the material standard of living of the affluent West-- is now being questioned. In part, such questioning is based on negative environmental consequences (what development did); in part, the questioning derives from the neglect of other than material dimensions of development, including the social, cultural and even spiritual dimensions of humanity (what development ignored). The rise of religious fundamentalism and of fierce ethnic rivalries, which have re-emerged in violent form throughout the world, are a powerful reminder of the growing importance of the non-material dimensions of development.

All of this calls for much more than a re-organization or re-engineering of institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and the United Nations. What is needed is the re-examination of the very meanings of development and progress at a time of unprecedented turmoil in practically all aspects of human activity.

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The development experiment was anchored in a political order that prevailed for five decades and which disappeared as we entered the 1990s. This has been replaced by the uncertainties accompanying a transition to a new, more complex and less predictable world order. The international economy is experiencing its most profound transformation since the industrial revolution, including major shifts in trade patterns, the globalization of financial markets, changes in the nature of work and the impact of technological advances, all of which challenge established economic practices, change power relations between economic agents, and require new strategies and policies to address them.

At the deeper level of society and culture, the time-honoured assumptions that have underpinned the local social order in many parts of the world are being overturned. An explosion of social demands, brought about in part by population growth and in part by the exposure to mass media, has overran the capacity of states, markets and civil society organizations to satisfy these demands. The consequences are particularly evident in (but by no means limited to) the developing regions and the former socialist countries. The complex web of human values and interpersonal relations that enable communities to live together is similarly being subjected to unprecedented strains in many parts of the world.

And all of this is driven by scientific advances and technological innovations whose pace and impact—both positive and negative—are unprecedented. As a consequence, those with access to—and with the capacity to absorb, use, and adapt—the advances in science and technology will be in a superior position to influence the conduct and evolution of human affairs. Those unable to gain such access and to turn it to good use will almost certainly be increasingly marginalized. Extreme differences are emerging in the capacity of peoples, both between and within nations, to tap into the knowledge revolution. This is limiting the possibility of many nations, communities and individuals to pursue their own chosen course of development. Taken together, the extreme imbalances that are emerging in access to knowledge and in the pace and magnitude of changes in science and technology are fast becoming the instruments of a new "global apartheid".

HUMANITY IN TRANSITION

All of these changes prefigure a completely new situation. Dramatic as they are, however, they are but part of an even larger framework of transformations which is challenging our understanding of the very essence of humanness, of our ideas about who we are as human beings, and about our place in the order of things. They are also challenging our value frameworks and our conceptions of the human potential.

The first of these challenges derives from the growing realization of the tight

coupling that exists between human beings and the environment. A fast-increasing body of scientific evidence acknowledges that we cannot continue to act with impunity on the environment, trusting blindly the regenerative capacities of ecosystems. This implies a radical shift away from the ideas that prevailed during the 18th, 19th and much of the 20th centuries, which conceived of human beings as lords and masters of the earth, with dominion over nature. We are now moving --albeit slowly-- towards considering human beings as stewards of a precious heritage that must be passed on to future generations.

We are also beginning to realize that advances in information technology are creating a new level of reality ("virtual reality", "cyberspace") that lies between the tangible and real world which has been with us since time immemorial, and the world of abstract concepts which has been with us for at least 2,500 years since the invention of theory by the Greeks. Communications technologies are also creating new modes of human interaction, and in the process are altering what we mean by experience, privacy, selfhood, cultural identity and governance.

In addition, we are becoming aware of our newfound capacity for consciously altering the direction of human evolution, and of the possibility to overcome the limitations of an individual's biological and genetic hardware. But, while science may be making it possible for us to manage our own biological evolution, the ethical and moral foundations for a conception of how to guide the evolution of our own species are lagging far behind.

Advances in expert systems, artificial intelligence and robotics are also forcing us to reconsider what we held as unique attributes of human beings. Awareness is growing of the impact that artifacts and mechanical constructions can have on the way we live, and an idea of "co-evolution" between humanity, nature and machines is beginning to emerge. Processes such as natural selection, once thought to be restricted to the realm of living organisms, are now being applied to computer programs and technological systems as well.

Finally, new speculations about the origins and the ultimate destiny of the universe, and new discoveries about the origin of life and of human beings, are putting the Earth and humanity in a cosmic context whose history spans billions of years. Against this backdrop, the ephemeral character of the few thousands of years of human civilization contrasts sharply with our capacity to transcend our limitations and comprehend the vastness of the world we inhabit.

In this regard, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has pointed out, it may be useful to remember that views as to whether the world is falling apart or coming together have fluctuated widely and with remarkable speed. At the beginning of the 1990s it was widely asserted that the world was coming together so fast that Western values such as

democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law and freedom of expression would soon be universally accepted. A few years later it became clear that these ideas were at remarkable variance with the actual conditions prevailing in places like the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, much of the Arab world, and large parts of Asia and of Africa. The idea of "coming together" ceased to be fashionable and the vogue shifted to "things falling apart".³

All of this shows that humanity is in the midst of a bewildering transition towards something that cannot as yet be clearly visualized (some intellectuals refer to this as the "post-modern condition"). Psychologists and psychiatrists are providing us daily with evidence that such momentous changes give rise to profound fears, lowered tolerance of uncertainty and deep atavistic yearnings to retreat to what is perceived as safe, to the certainties of the past and to primal loyalties. However, the changes in our conception of human nature and of the human condition are so profound and rapid that it will not be possible for us to turn around and go back to where we were even a few years ago.

However, the awareness of the fundamental impact that advances in knowledge are having on the conception of humanity is not universally shared. On the contrary, it remains rather restricted to those with access to information, with knowledge of these complex matters, and with interest and willingness to explore their difficult and far reaching implications. Of particular concern is the fact that most of those aware of the fact that humanity is in transition belong to the high-income countries, with the consequent bias in their interpretations of the changes under way and of the options to confront them.

RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT AND THE LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE

In all societies, since the emergence of abstract reasoning and language, metaphors, myths and stories have been required to allow humankind to appreciate the complexity of our predicament and to provide guidance for the future. Over the past half-century, the idea of a universal and unifying development has been one such metaphor and is now one whose basic premises no longer hold. Yet, in a turbulent world where humanity is stumbling towards an uncertain future still to be shaped by our actions, it has become essential to create worldviews and images to guide the efforts aimed at improving the human condition.

In order to do this, the language used to talk about development needs to be modified. This will not be easy. The inertia of old habits of thought and speech make it difficult for us to accept new ways of addressing existing problems, some of which have

³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, Concord, Ontario, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1994.

become depressingly familiar to us. Intellectuals and scholars are more inclined to readjust concepts and theories rather than rethink their fundamental relevance and correctness.

To illustrate, we choose an example from economics. According to the prevailing economic theories of the mid-20th Century, what was called "stagflation" (inflation with growing unemployment) simply could not occur. It did not fit any respectable economic theory. Yet, at the end of the 1960s, it had become clear in the United States that inflation was no longer trading off with reductions in unemployment. The initial reaction of most economists was that what was happening was simply not possible, and much intellectual effort was expended in demonstrating that the economy would return to its "normal" state as soon as a few marginal policy adjustments were made. Reality, however, proved to be stubborn, and the growing evidence had, finally, to be accepted as a turning point in economics --actually the end of Keynesianism.

The point is that minor adjustments within the frameworks of current constructs of development will prove futile, since those constructs take but scant account of the overwhelming new realities that are sweeping all aspects of the old order aside. If it is to catch up with those new realities, an essential starting point must be the modification of the language of development to emphasize, among other things, the diversity and centrality of human values, the expansion of human capabilities, the key role played by the capacity to generate and utilize knowledge and the importance of respecting environmental constraints. Indeed, the very word "development" may have to be replaced by a new one --still to be defined-- in order to reflect the variety of new ideas and concerns it should encompass.

Furthermore, the results of any attempt at redefining development and progress can have only a tentative and provisional character; there can be no "Holy Grail", no single, comprehensive view of this in our turbulent times. Although we may yearn for simple and complete mental images (or stories or myths or theories) to explain the world around us, the new complexity in and the changing nature of the human condition require that we develop evolving and flexible conceptual frameworks that incorporate ambiguity and uncertainty, while at the same time maintain intellectual rigor.

The ambiguity and uncertainty notwithstanding, there is a base on which to build such conceptual frameworks. In the first instance, we need not throw aside the experience of nearly five decades of effort in international development cooperation. It has been a rich experience and an experiment of historically unmatched nobility of purpose. Whatever its defects, the experience can provide valuable insights and lessons in the search for new meanings for development and progress.

The first of these lessons is that the **capacity to acquire and generate knowledge in all its forms --including the recovery and upgrading of traditional**

knowledge-- is perhaps the most important factor in the improvement of the human condition. History is, of course, replete with illustrations of the negative consequences of scientific and technological advances, including the wholesale dislocation of entire societies. But the development experience of the past half-century also demonstrates unequivocally that, without access to the benefits of scientific and technological advances, it is simply not possible to improve standards of living --both material and non-material-- of the majority of the world's population or to increase the opportunities for people to realize their full potential.

Considering the highly skewed distribution of scientific and technological capabilities, which are largely concentrated in the industrialized countries of Europe, in the USA and in Japan, obtaining access to the benefits of science and technology presents a most serious challenge for most of the world's population. The fact that a handful of developing countries (e.g. South Korea, Singapore, India and, to a lesser extent, China, Brazil and Chile) have been able to acquire their own research and development capabilities provides a measure of reassurance that this is not an entirely impossible task.

Therefore, any rethinking of development and progress must include the devising of policies to facilitate the acquisition, utilization and generation of science and technology within individual states, societies and communities.

The second lesson is that **participation and decentralization of power are essential to improving standards of living and increasing opportunities for all.** Development is something that people do to and for themselves and it is sustained only when the beneficiaries of development are also its owners. This may appear axiomatic, but it is a lesson that governments and international development institutions remain slow to grasp. With overwhelming regularity, development experiences have shown that delegating policy and decision making to grass-roots organizations, professional associations, local and regional governments, productive and service enterprises, and, more generally, to organizations of civil society allows for cultural heterogeneity and creates the sense of local ownership of policies and strategies necessary to their functioning and sustainability.

The third lesson is closely related to the preceding one. It refers to the **crucial importance of institutional factors in creating the social setting for the definition and pursuit of development objectives.** Many of the failures of development efforts are, quite rightly, attributed to the absence or weakness of appropriate institutional factors. Institutions comprise patterns of behaviour, long-standing social relations, and formal rules and regulations, all of which give structure to the fabric of society, allow for the evolution of shared purposes and commitment, provide a basis for cooperative behaviour, and create the stability and predictability necessary to underpin human efforts.

Institutional structures that are flexible and participatory, as well as forms of democratic governance that allow for orderly changes in the exercise of political power and prevent its excessive concentration, are becoming essential for responding adequately to the rapidly changing demands of contemporary civilization, in business as well as in government.

The fourth lesson is that **development thinking and practice have become excessively dependent on economic theory**, and particularly on those theories that emphasize the role of competition and impersonal market forces in the process of economic growth and development. This is not to dismiss these theories as irrelevant; on the contrary, the evidence points to these as necessary conditions for development. The point is that they fall far short of providing the sufficient set of conditions that are required for improving the human condition.

While competitive pressures are a powerful force for improved performance in all fields of human activity, experience with development demonstrates that there is a strong mutual interaction between the networks of civic engagements, qualitative economic change and effective governance. Societies that values reciprocity, trust, solidarity and mutual assistance are likely to be more effective in dealing with the helplessness that accompanies profound change and in improving overall living standards than societies where competition and individual achievement are not balanced by these considerations. This requires new conceptions of the relation between the State and civil society, and of the balance between market forces and government actions in the process of improving economic and social well-being.

The fifth lesson is that **most of the serious problems and challenges that development now faces no longer have purely local or national solutions**. As trade and communications have more and more interconnect the world, the international context has become critical to development efforts and interdependence as a concept has become an integral requirement to any concept of development. This applies equally to the industrialized and the poorer countries, which makes the task of development, whatever meaning we may assign to this word, infinitely more complex than that which is afforded by the theory and practice of the past half-century.

The sixth lesson is that **environmental considerations must be integral to our conceptions of development**, as well as to the design of development strategies and policies. In addressing the differential environmental impacts of poverty/deprivation and high consumption, it will be impossible to avoid complex political and value judgements regarding the adequate and sufficient standards of material well being. These judgements will become even more difficult when we move to devise and put into effect the means to address these impacts.

Nevertheless, more than being merely inefficient in terms of cost, pursuing economic growth objectives and later adding policies to counteract their negative impact on the environment has proved also to be ineffective. If there is to be an adequate conception of development, that conception must promote simultaneously economic growth, poverty alleviation and environmental improvement. We would appear today to be far removed from such a conception. As a result and as the scope for actions of such simultaneous benefits becomes more limited, it will be necessary to develop clear policies and strong institutions to manage the tradeoffs and conflicts between these objectives. This also will push the issues of values and power relations to the forefront of development debates.

In addition, the post-war concept of development, which continues to dominate, has been largely bounded by considerations of current equity. This is not serving present needs, neither will it accord with future challenges. Public discourse and public policy are shifting --albeit slowly-- to inter-generational considerations, to concerns that improvements in living standards achieved by the current generation do not impair the possibilities of future generations. This entails a new conception of equity and social justice unbounded by time.

The final lesson is that **values and the non-material aspects of human activities play a most important role in development efforts**. For most of the past four decades, factors such as culture, religion and ethnic allegiances have been all but ignored in development theory and practice. Indeed, for the most part, these factors (e.g. tribalism) have been treated as "anti-development". Yet beyond the levels associated with the need for survival, most of humanity is driven by deep cultural, ethical and spiritual motives and concerns. Awareness of this is growing and any new conception of development must incorporate values and the non-material aspects of development.

Cultural identities, ethnic allegiances, spiritual values, religions and ethical issues, however, may also be in inherent conflict with each other. There are many different perspectives from which each of these are viewed and put in practice. This places any new conception of development in a position of inherent discomfort because it must accept to remain both tentative and provisional. There is also in this a paradoxical lesson: the price of heterogeneity in value systems is the universal recognition of certain values --such as mutual tolerance, respect for the views of others, and freedom to express dissent-- that are a precondition to all other values.

These lessons from the global development experiment can be considered as points of reference for attempts at redefining what we mean by development. Together with an appreciation of the complex transition we are going through as a new century approaches, they provide a frame to weave the weft of concepts and the warp of practice into a fabric of strategies, policies and actions to improve the human condition.

KNOWLEDGE AND THE CREATION AND REALIZATION OF VALUES

In attempting to redefine what we mean by development and progress, we must search for conceptions that are both broad and dynamic. As a working hypothesis, we venture the suggestion that **development and progress should be redefined as the open-ended process of creating and realizing new values, of seeking to evolve shared perceptions of what humanity is and should be, and of devising the means for advancing, both individually and collectively, towards putting those values in practice.**

Implicit in this definition is the clear assumption that there is no single paradigm that can explain our reality and help to guide us in the selection of policies and strategies. Implicit also is the acceptance of diversity, the existence of conflict and the need for conflict resolution, which highlight the crucial importance of values such as tolerance, respect for the views of others and openness.

It is important to realise that, in the continuing elusive search for development, advances in knowledge about the world we live in and about ourselves have given us, as never before, the power to design and choose our own future. Enormous possibilities now exist for consciously influencing the very nature of human evolution. But this, too, is paradoxical: advances in science and technology provide also the means to increased inequalities and greater social exclusion. The ambiguous character of advances in knowledge (and in the technologies that allow access to it) forces us to take responsibility for the human values and institutional arrangements that guide its development and use.

Modern science has evolved into the most efficient means for generating knowledge, have become the most effective instruments for dealing with the challenges of the physical and social environment, and productive and service activities associated with modern technology have acquired a huge potential to satisfy basic human needs of a material nature. In addition, scientific research can help in the recovery and upgrading of traditional knowledge and of traditional technologies. To tap into this potential, however, requires identifying domains of human activity, together with the devising of appropriate policies and strategies, where scientific research, knowledge acquisition, technological innovation and productivity improvement can all be brought together. What is clear is that most developing countries are still a long way from achieving this synthesis, even in those areas that are most critical to their development efforts.

It follows from this perspective that, in the aggregate, societies, communities and individuals will become increasingly marginalized if they are unable to harness science

and technology as a means to create and utilize knowledge and, in consequence, to obtain the resources for the thought and action leading to new values. As human beings, we have a capacity to establish conscious distinctions between preferred and not preferred things, states, events, emotions and ideas. It has, however, ever been the case that the transition from individual to collective preferences is a problematic process, riddled with conflicts and paradoxes. It is only to the extent that certain preferences become accepted, widely shared and institutionalized that they can be transformed into values, into a collective perception of what is desirable within a community and into values.

What is clear, therefore, is that the concept of development as it has endured for some fifty years is now an anachronism. It is equally clear that in the transition to the information-intensive 21st Century, the availability of resources, including principally the access to science and technology, to support the thought and action required for the generation and realization of new values will be the principal determinant of the well being of humanity.

Any attempt to redefine development and progress must turn the revolutionary pace of advances in science and technology, as well as the recent and dramatic growth in global interdependence, into new possibilities for elaborating and sharing such collective perceptions, and also for designing the institutional arrangements that will make these values a reality.

WHAT NEXT? SOME POSSIBLE INITIATIVES

We have dwelt on the need to redefine what we mean by development and progress, and have tried to give a sense of the turbulence we are experiencing in the transition to a new century. Considering the possibilities that now exist for consciously influencing the direction of human evolution, we suggested that it is important to explore and contrast our conceptions of development and progress from a variety of viewpoints. The preceding pages indicate the richness of the agenda before us.

As an illustration of how this general appreciation can be transformed into much-needed initiatives, we highlight four issues:

- The need for a broad, long-term program of comparative research and studies joining developing and developed country teams, aimed at exploring the role and nature of values in different cultural and geographical settings, and at examining the processes that could evolve more widely shared conceptions of progress and development;
- The need for innovative policies and strategies in the developing regions to

improve the capacity to generate and utilize knowledge, focusing particularly on the importance of stable domestic sources of support for building up science and technology capabilities;

- The need to devise new ways of financing international development efforts that look beyond the nation-state to the world economy and to global resources, so as to provide stable and predictable sources of funding to a wide range of initiatives that aim at improving the human condition; and
- The need for partnerships between developed and developing country institutions to identify and work on issues that are of mutual interest and benefit to both, such as the future of work and the prospects for democratic governance in the light of the multiplicity of economic, political, social and technological changes.

These are just four of the many items that would conform to a broad agenda of possible initiatives to improve our understanding of the times in which we are living and of ways to improve the human condition. At present there are many institutions and organizations of academic, professional, financial, advocacy, political and religious nature, both at the national and international levels, that are actively engaged --often without being fully conscious of it-- in promoting actions and initiatives to advance our understanding of what needs to be done and how to do it.

Among these institutions, it is our view that private foundations and independent development cooperation agencies have a special place and could play an especially important role. In contrast with international financial institutions, which have to be conservative because of the need to preserve their financial standing, and bilateral cooperation agencies, which are instruments of foreign policy, private foundations and independent development cooperation agencies can take greater risks, engage more readily in joint programs, choose more freely their areas of interest, support initiatives for relatively long periods without having to show immediate results, and operate in a flexible way without overbearing administrative or political constraints. Private foundations and independent development cooperation agencies have demonstrated throughout their history the capacity for leadership in areas considered too risky, politically charged or complex for the larger financial and technical cooperation institutions and, in doing so, they have been the catalyst to major global efforts (e.g. the Green Revolution, contraceptive research).

In the present context and because of these factors, the private foundations and independent development cooperation agencies are in a unique position to influence the course the human affairs will take in the transition to a new century. They are in a privileged position to lead efforts to address broad questions such as the changing nature of humanness, the meaning of progress and development, the questions of value

creation and realization, the role of knowledge generation and utilization in contemporary civilization, the new character of governance and of the demands for leadership, the impact of advances in science and technology on human activities and on their relation to the physical environment, and the design of strategies to improve the condition of the vast majority of human beings.

The search for development and progress has proved elusive over much of history and for much of humankind. That search is now taking place in a much more complex, uncertain and turbulent context. The move to a new century in the Christian calendar is a symbolic occasion for renewal and for looking forward. As Conor Cruise O'Brien put it, this is "...an occasion for self-questioning, for rational apprehension, above all for trying to clear our heads, before it is too late...". Central to the clearing of our heads should be the concern to improve the condition of the vast majority of human beings. This calls for nothing less than a fundamental re-examination of the concepts of development and progress, an urgent task that must not be delayed.