

Development as Global Standardization?

An intentional fallacy

Privilege Haang'andu SJ

The World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil, which ran from January 27 to February 1, was preceded by a pre-forum gathering of the Social Apostolate, an event that brought together more than 231 Jesuits and collaborators, more than half of whom were Jesuits. The meeting, organized by the Jesuit Provincials and major Superiors of Latin America, was a moment for us to reflect seriously on how our understanding of faith can help the cause of the marginalized indigenous people of the Amazon. Ecological justice was at the heart of this meeting. The indigenous people of the Amazon live in the forests and the destruction of their forests threatens not only their livelihood but also their very cultural identity.

Much has been said about the outcomes of this meeting through various internet postings. My own angle here is a reflection on the environmental aspect, a crucially important issue. What is at stake is nothing less than the paradigm of development. The debate raises apostolic opportunities for the Church in general and the Society of Jesus in particular.

While General Congregation (GC) 32 stressed faith and social justice, GC 35 speaks of faith and ecology (D.3 n.31-36). While GC 32 was followed by various works within the Society of Jesus to promote social justice, the findings of the pre-forum this year underline the urgency felt within the Society of Jesus to take up the issue of ecological justice in a structured way. Deforestation in the Amazon region and elsewhere, mounting carbon emissions that increase global warming and unsustainable trends of consumerism threaten our earth. The Society and all concerned peoples everywhere are called upon to act systematically and concertedly to save the planet.

It would however be a mistake to think that environmental degradation is invariably an effect only of large-scale practices; individual habitual practices, taken together, can also endanger the capacity and future of the planet. Consumerism is a fallacy that does humanity very little credit. Discussions at the pre-forum and at the World Social Forum made it clear that human beings need to face the fact that the earth's resources are limited. Unless there is a radical change in patterns of consumerism, all forms of life on this planet will be affected; some may disappear altogether.

The Cartesian approach to our relationship with the environment raises another problem - the displacement of peoples that occurs with indiscriminate

deforestation and the erection of industrial plants. What paradigm of development is this that prioritizes capital and profit over human beings? Indigenous people living in the forestlands are pushed out when huge multinational companies seek to establish themselves and have perforce to relocate. If the Amazon seems far away, an example nearer home is the mass resettlement of thousands of Zambians and Zimbabweans during the Kariba Dam construction project from 1955 to 1959. Such movements have led to landlessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, and even, in some countries, destruction of communities. The displacement of the Tonga people during the construction of the Kariba dam meant people had to leave not only their homes but also their fertile lands that they had farmed for centuries, where they had fished, worshipped their gods, raised their children and buried their dead. Simply put, the people were robbed of all that gave them a sense of who they were and where they belonged.

Surely such a pattern of development cannot be justified; it is inherently flawed. We cannot seek development for people by destroying the very people whose development we seek. The well-being and integrity of human beings are the *raison d'être* of development and nothing that diminishes the human person in the name of development can then be justified. Increased material wealth is not likely to compensate human beings for arrangements that erode their self-respect and impair their freedom. Community is the place where people find most meaning and identify themselves as distinct from other societies in language, culture, and worldview. Though these cannot be quantified in economic terms, they are fundamental to a comprehensive, humane understanding of development relevant to planning and policy analysis.

By clarifying the existence of important values not taken account of by economic efficiency in its pursuit of development, we undermine its assumed importance. Even if we upheld the value of economic efficiency, we would still have to ask, 'efficient for whom?' This question helps us to see that the values of one group of people might not be the same as the values of another group. Given that possibility, an economic understanding of efficiency might not actually make sense to a naturalistic people for whom every piece of land is not seen as a possible site for infrastructure construction. For some groups, clearance of forests might mean destruction of their divine homesteads. These considerations are cardinal to a comprehensive understanding of development and to promoting an ethics of recognition among diverse peoples.

Development is not development if it ignores the values of human community and lets the process of creating infrastructure take precedence

over human settlements. After all, some of those existential values¹ have an a priori claim, either because economic life in the long run rests on respect for them, or because they have a deeper normative significance.

I think GC 35 opens inexhaustible opportunities for the Society of Jesus to enter tactfully into meaningful works of ecological justice. A new evangelization of the world can lead towards a different relationship between human beings and nature. Perhaps the Society does not require new institutional structures for the implementation of the 35th GC `s dream. Could not the mandatory inclusion of ecological justice in Jesuit educational institutions be an important step towards that new world which values and respects creation, refusing to see it only as an inexhaustible pool of resources? A new paradigm of development is urgently, crucially important if life on this earth is to continue, and all creatures, great and small, preserved.

Privilege Haang'andu SJ
Programme Officer for Debt and Public Resource Monitoring at the
Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR)
Lusaka, Zambia

¹By existential values here is meant those values that are foundational to the being of community as community, for example, common land, shared social space necessary for physical proximity and physical territorial boundaries.