

*Dryland Networks Programme*

ISSUES PAPER

**DEVELOPMENT  
COOPERATION AND  
THE DEVELOPMENT-  
ENVIRONMENT CRISIS**

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ENVIRONMENT AND  
DEVELOPMENT

**Paper No. 25**

**March**

**1991**

This paper was first published in IFDA Dossier 79 of October/December 1990.

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# **DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT- ENVIRONMENT CRISIS**

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## DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT-ENVIRONMENT CRISIS

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Development cooperation, a relatively recent euphemism for government and non-government, bilateral and multilateral development aid, has gone through several phases. During the late forties and early fifties development in the newly independent countries of Asia, notably India and China, was thought of in highly self-reliant terms and without aid. Development as modernisation and industrialisation on the Western model was launched in India during the fifties and became tied to external aid, initially as education and expertise and technology transfer for industrialisation and infrastructure development and later as relief, welfare, poverty-alleviation and development measures in the rural sector. The bulk of this has been and continues to be channeled on bilateral - country to country - and multilateral - via international agencies - basis.

The non-government voluntary sector in India after the abortive self-reliant Gramdan-Gramswarajya effort in the fifties also became linked with government and international funding agency supported relief, welfare, poverty-alleviation and rural development. While these continued, experiments in awareness raising, organisation and mobilisation of the poor around local social justice, human rights and environment issues were carried out by independent Gandhian, Marxist and Christian social action groups with considerable ideas and inputs from Canada, Britain, Switzerland, West Germany and Holland based funding agencies.

These raised funds and provided support both within and outside the Christian churches context. Later these agencies also channeled government funds from the "donor" countries. Non-government funding from both the United States, mainly private foundations set up by industrialists, has played an important, even decisive role in policy, priority and management direction in the voluntary sector in India. More recently, Scandinavian non-government agency support with government funding has also become available. Finland is perhaps the most recent entrant on this scene.

I should like to address the problem of development cooperation in the context of dysfunctioning and counter-productive nature of global development dominated by the various modes of state and corporate control. Development has been the main enterprise of these systems during the past four decades. This development has served the interest of the ruling elite worldwide and provided them with a highly wasteful, consumerist style and standard of living. This same development has, on the other hand, brought about widespread destruction of natural resources creating a crisis of survival, initially for those directly dependent on these

resources and potentially for all humankind. African famines of the seventies and eighties, droughts and desertification of Sahelian regions in Africa and Asia, destruction of tropical forests, acid rains, warming of the earth's atmosphere and ruptures in the ozone layer are some of the disasters and hazards that can be squarely laid at the door of development. Although we are increasingly aware and even anxious about the links between environmental degradation and development globally, we still tend to opt for both environment and development. Sooner rather than later we shall have to make some hard choices.

Let me elaborate and illustrate this with reference to what development has brought in our part of the world, the Aravalis in southern Rajasthan in India. India launched itself on the path of industrialisation and development without access to others' resources through colonisation. Instead it took to internal colonisation and exploitation of the rural areas in general and tribal areas in particular. Aravalis, a hilly watershed region inhabited by the Bhil tribal and other rural communities is one such area. Some thirty years ago it had extensive subtropical forests covering over 70% of the surface and providing a livelihood basis to the village communities in a 50,000 sq km area. Although some of the forest lands were owned by the ruling family and feudal landlords, by far the greater part of forests and pastures were used and controlled by village communities. These communities, with the village as the unit of resource control and management, practised cultivation in well-watered valleys, open grazing in forests and pastures and the gathering of a variety of forest produce for their local needs. With the constitution of the post-colonial state, all the private and the bulk of community forest lands were declared state forest lands. The private owners managed to cut down and encash the forests before transferring the lands to the state. Under the 'Grow More Food' campaign people were encouraged to settle on and cultivate forest lands including slopes. On state forest lands commercial and revenue forestry involving clearfelling by quick profit-seeking contractors was carried out. Much of the remaining village pastures and forests were encroached upon and appropriated by local powerful interests.

As the forests disappeared the whole area became prone to droughts. Its natural productivity diminished. The perennial streams dried up. There emerged chronic food shortages (as distinct from periodic famine) and a pattern of dependence on relief labour. Whenever and wherever this was not available, the communities with increased human and livestock populations took recourse to cut the remaining forest for sale in the urban areas. Every drought year has taken a severe toll of the forest cover. As a consequence the forest cover is reduced to less than 5% of the area. More recently urbanisation and industrialisation have brought new pressure not only on the forest but also on the surface and ground water resources. They have drawn upon the existing water reserves at extremely low costs invariably depriving the traditional users, namely the farmers. Thus during the eighties the irrigated area of the Udaipur district was

reduced by half. The ground water table is estimated to be depleting by one metre annually. The period 1985 to 1988 witnessed three successive droughts each of increasing severity culminating in the Trikal, triple drought, with food, fodder and water scarcity, bringing the region to the verge of a Sahelian disaster. This was averted by large scale and largely adequate relief supported by the state and voluntary agencies on the one hand, and the timely onset of monsoon rains on the other.

As elsewhere in the world the command instruments and engines of this development-led destruction have been state and corporate sector agencies with their planned and unplanned activities. In the Indian context questions were raised and warning sounded about the western model and path of development by no less a figure than Mahatma Gandhi. He did not live to press the point. Some of his followers, notably Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan, continued the criticism and tried to pioneer a different way through Bhodan (land gift), Gramdan (village gift), Gram Swarajya (village self government), Swadeshi (indigenous), trusteeship and partyless people's candidate democracy movements. All these and other ideas and experiments were derived from the constructive programme Mahatma Gandhi launched in the twenties. The primary agents visualised for carrying these out were to be independent citizens with a clear sense of direction, a strong indigenous value basis and a spirit of service and sacrifice. The Indian state, though committed to a modern, non-Gandhian path of development, tried to accommodate the Gandhian and other voluntary impulses and initiatives through assigning these a role in relief, welfare and, later, poverty alleviation and providing patronage as well as funding. The private business sector, which had given considerable moral and material support to constructive work during the struggle for independence, together with the state, chose the path of modern development and confined its help to voluntary sector's relief, welfare and poverty alleviation/rural development efforts. While it has voiced doubts and questions, sometimes rising to critiques and indictment about the direction and particular projects and consequences of development, the overall location and performance of the non-governmental organisations have been within the context of mainstream development.

However, until 1985 our work was no exception to this general pattern. As the droughts became more frequent and severe the headloads and illicit truckers of wood began to loom large in our consciousness. A resolve emerged that this self-destruction had to stop. As a first step we got together an informal group of tribal young people in one village to begin thinking about what was happening and why. We revived the memories of elders about what life was like when the forests were intact. They talked of a time of plenty in terms of fodder, milk, grains and forest produce. They understood their present poverty as linked with deforestation and accepted the need to prevent future felling. But for this an alternative livelihood was needed. We suggested the protection and plantation of a small degraded hillside pasture

of 20 hectares. This was accepted and carried out. After the first rainy season this area showed dramatic natural regeneration and provided fodder for the livestock of 40 families for the whole dry season. Following this demonstration the message spread to the surrounding 25 villages and in the following three years our work extended for an area of 2000 hectares. We raised nurseries of local species, built protection walls, planted and replanted, set up maintenance, protection and product sharing arrangements, carried out soil and water conservation measures, built bio-gas plants and underground water storage tanks, and organised training camps, walks and cultural programmes to spread and reinforce the message. Concurrently, we discussed and wrote about the issue at local, state and national level to focus attention and to mobilise public opinion and action.

This effort is a small example of what can be done by a determined group of local people in stemming destruction and reorienting development with adequate inputs of resources and educational and management support. After the realisation of the damage done, the communities regained their sense of worth about their own resources of land, water and vegetation. They launched measures for the restoration and regeneration of these. Their efforts have been rewarded and reinforced by the good rains of last year. Of course, they still do not understand, let alone control the larger forces that are continuing destructive development.

One of the most crucial tasks is to create awareness about this damage and destruction and relate it to the dominant trends of development. During the past two decades independent citizens, scientists and thinkers individually and in groups at various levels, as well as community and citizens' organisations have analysed and highlighted these issues. They have also carried out preventive and curative action. A whole new genre of voluntary activity has emerged around environment crisis. However, the vast majority of conventional non-governmental organisations are still engaged in relief, welfare, poverty alleviation etc. in the mainstream development context. They lack a framework and methodology of understanding development from environmental impact and sustainability angles. They also lack a sense of crisis and a will to resist destructive development. Beyond this they do not have a regenerative perspective or planning related to their activities.

At this juncture it is worth reflecting on the nature of voluntary initiative, organisation and action in society and its ambivalent relationship with systems. Voluntary action is rooted in the characteristic of human freedom which is exercised by people as individuals, as social beings and as citizens. From experience and understanding of the problematique of a particular epoch and culture, voluntary action generates creative, reactive and corrective responses at various levels depending on its range of relationship and responsibility. Voluntary response as the consciousness and conscience of society has special significance in a time of crisis. It contains in itself the potential for a variety of

approaches, experiments and ideas. It also occupies the crucial open space in social innovation and resolution which is often contended for control and manipulation by partisan power interest, including the state.

As already pointed out, much of earlier conventional voluntary effort in development and in development cooperation became located and coopted within mainstream development in an uncritical manner. The present development/environment crisis has given rise to new voluntary initiatives and movements. These are concerned with study analysis and critique, policy and reformation and experimentation for alternative modes and directions. These too are threatened by co-option by the command systems which have not remained oblivious or indifferent to the crisis situation.

While remaining entrapped and persistently committed to development dictated by wasteful and destructive production-consumption lifestyles and maintenance of established elite dominance through militarism and economic control, after the seventies they have shown a willingness to launch reform related to the environment, human rights, alleviation of poverty and peace issues. This inviting openness has often tempted the voluntary individuals and organisations to link energies and efforts with the corrective measures planned or launched by the command systems, giving them strength and legitimacy and, at the same time, depriving the grass roots, community and social counter-movements of intellectual calibre and coherence.

The crucial contributory factor for this tendency is the social character and education-socialisation of volunteers who by and large see their carrier and lifestyle basically in the same terms as the command elites. They also do not recognise any instruments other than state and corporate power for transformation on such a large scale. Their voluntary action is about their degree of freedom of action and organisation in the prevailing system but not about creative alternatives and movements such as feminism, indigenous people's movements, conscientious objection and peace movements, green lifestyles, communitarianism etc.

Yet voluntary action remains the domain of human freedom and possibility and the most poignant and powerful expression of this free will occurs in individual creative endeavour. Therefore, I wish to suggest that in this hour of systemic-institutional sclerosis, ecological humanist liberative voluntary response can manifest itself either at the individual level or amongst communities and groups at risk. These two in a complementing non-dogmatic, non-paternalistic relationship hold the potential for an epochal movement for regeneration. The first recovery and discovery has to be of one's own self, recovery from its being mortgaged and discovery from the overlay of the dead weight of the system. The first realisation of the potential and responsibility has to be in one's own person. The first and primary listening has to be one's own conscience, the small inner voice of Gandhi, antaratma, that is paraatma. The first experience of



pain and anguish has to be in one's own heart. The first stirrings of compassion and sensibility, sanvedna, have to be felt in one's own being. This recovery also involves considerable shedding and leaving behind of the superfluous and redundant.

Together with this regaining of one's self there has to be acceptance of one's relationship and responsibility with the world, the global whole at this juncture in human history. In relation to the impoverished and imperilled, the most capable among the concerned and caring have to locate themselves right in the midst of the people and regions in crisis. The ridiculous lopsidedness of the present arrangements - whereby the most intelligent and competent crowd the apex research, communication training and funding institutions while the field and community languish for want of adequate leadership - has to be radically altered. For a healthy regeneration, the best seeds have to be sown in the soil and not kept in showcases.

It is from this location and sensitive and caring relationship that the mission and tasks for ensuring survival, for preventing further destruction, for restoration of productive assets, for laying claim to resources and opportunity, for advocacy and highlighting the cause and for understanding sound regeneration can be visualised and carried out. This will involve another recovery and discovery of the community's own strength and potential for more development. It will also require confronting, challenging and changing the established modes and structures of the state, corporate power, society, church and even voluntary sector at different levels.

This perspective has several implications for development cooperation which cannot continue as "business as usual". There has to be a period of moratorium on conventional "development co-operation" so that there is a breathing space and opportunity for honest review and reflection. This is needed at all levels from the personal to community and public to institutional to network and systemic with a sense of urgency and responsibility and with in-built opportunity for sharing process, insights and decisions amongst partners. Its agenda could include:

1. The nature of the development/environment crisis globally and in one's own region/country; systemic/historical basis of crisis.
2. Voluntary ethos/mission modes, voluntary role and response in development co-operation so far, in conventional terms.
3. Own system/society/nation perception of and response to crisis; options and opportunities in policies and resources; attitudes and opinions.

4. "At risk" communities/habitats/eco-systems situations and response.
5. Concepts and experiments/efforts toward alternative, non-destructive, sustainable recovery/regeneration and development globally and in own region/country.
6. Strategies for voluntary's intervention and cooperation for resistance/prevention/restoration/regeneration and reorientation of lifestyles, relationship and development.

This is a common agenda for partners in the north and south. It assumes that there are individuals in all systems, communities and organisations who have the capability and courage to be critical and open towards a common predicament.

Let me conclude with a comment on voluntary citizen action and politics. A citizen in a democratic society has many varied social and political roles. Even politics as the exercise and control of power has dimensions which are not all subsumed by or subservient to the functioning of the state. As a voluntary social worker, I do not give eminence to power politics in the social field. At the same time my being part of the voluntary sector does not prevent me from exercising a political role. Choosing a major involvement in the voluntary sector is not tantamount to undermining politics, as some allege. Many sensitive people find the present power politics disgusting. I am one of them. I see my political task in different terms. Present politics does not have a clue in relation to the environmental crisis. This is a crisis of politics itself. It has to be understood in the same manner as the crisis of politics in the 19th century when the marxist idiom began to be articulated, when the socialist ideal began to be argued. Today ecological concerns and issues are waiting for an idiom and modes of organisation and action for which potential lies in non-party social movements.

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