

Africa: A Troubled Continent (4)

Reflections on Development

Natural disasters kill thousands of people in Africa each year, cause disease and injury for tens of thousands more, and leave hundreds of thousands homeless. For instance, an earthquake, which received no international media attention, hit the district of Bariada, Tanzania without warning on June 29, 2002. The quake and its consequent tremors destroyed homes, damaged schools, water sources, clinics and other community services.

On November 25, 2002 a local newspaper reported in bold headlines, "STARVING TO DEATH: Malnutrition, disease and starvation stalk more than 16 million people in Southern Africa. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, have died and if the world doesn't respond quickly, 300,000 people could perish before March's harvest."

Man-made calamities caused by racial and religious conflicts, civil wars, military aggression, communal violence, mismanagement, greed, corruption and nepotism are common. *World magazine* (Oct.12, 2002) declared: "Zimbabwe: Politically created and sustained famine 'dwarfs' those of Ethiopia and Sudan that capture so many headlines." Besides natural and politically created disasters, people are still held in various kinds of bondage. Slavery is even practised. A 1996 article in the *Ottawa Times* complained that "persecution of Christians constitutes the most serious human rights crisis in the world today," and that in the Sudan, "many Christian boys are forced into Islamic camps, whilst others are sold as slaves."

The world is still divided in two: one rich, one poor; one literate, one largely illiterate; one affluent and consumption-oriented, one poverty- stricken and subsistence-oriented. How can suffering Africa be restored and reconstructed? Does the affluent West still have the will to come to its aid? Or do the poor in Africa appear like a swarm of threatening locusts ready to devour the wealth of former colonial powers?

Who are the poor?

A universally accepted yardstick to measure poverty has only limited value. Poverty is not merely the absence of money. The Tsongas, a minority tribe in the Republic of South Africa, have a proverb saying: "To be poor is like a bewitched person." Poverty leaves a person helpless, destitute, needy, penniless. The poor are those who don't have money, food, clothes and land. Among these people health is a luxury, hunger is a rule, and basic needs such as housing, health and education are the stuff of dreams. The poor, in short, have nothing but their poverty. They are the voiceless, the powerless, the vulnerable, people without rights.

The emotional demands of horrific suffering seen on television are strong. Western nations often provide massive aid and relief during the most potent disasters and

emergencies. And a great deal of thought is given to find a more permanent solution to Africa's plight. A newly - coined phrase "development for peace" became fashionable around the middle of this century, at first in the sense of economic growth. Non-economic aspects of human development were deemed to be less important. In today's world it is a rare political agenda in which development does not have a prominent place. The whole world is divided into "developed" and "developing" countries, with some allocated to "the least developed" category. Traditionally, the term development was used uncritically by Westerners to describe their efforts to help people and communities toward better standards of health, literacy, clothing, housing etc. The presupposition was that to change the standard of living toward the "ideal" – namely Western lifestyle and Western standards – is the best contribution one can make. Those with other lifestyles were therefore viewed as less fortunate, backward, primitive, uncivilized, or underdeveloped. The paternalistic assumption is: the "haves" are bestowing something on the "have-nots"; Westerners are "developed," others are "undeveloped"; the African poor will never – almost by definition – be able to achieve the "standards" that are set by Westerners, etc. However, the fact is that these standards merely reflect the West's materialistic worldview and values.

Development definition

But what does development mean? The term is commonly used with reference to such diverse matters as fundraising, improvement of property or resources, increased effectiveness and profitability of a business or a social enterprise. In my reading on the subject I was struck by the lack of a consensus on what constitutes development. Surprisingly little attention is given to any precise definition or to the connection between development and human well-being. It is automatically assumed that development, whatever it may be, is a good thing representing advancement and progress. But the assumption that Western societies can be regarded as models for African development is probably one of the least questioned. Why should the West's impressive scientific, technological and commercial achievements be regarded as models of development? Today's Western societies, with all their technical know-how, provide a spiritual and social poverty-stricken environment that is not conducive to the development of human well being. The West's view of development promotes the idea that the good life depends on gratifying our desires, to get what we can get out of life. From this perspective the future well-being of our civilization seems to depend on pervasive commercialism and consumerism.

And this is precisely the approach taken by the World Bank, which describes itself as the "the world's principal development agency." It defines development as the promotion of "economic growth" and the fight against poverty as "the fundamental tasks of world development." It acts in the name of long-suffering taxpayers in the West, who have absolutely no say in how their money is spent. Over the years development has become an industry that employs hundreds of thousands of people around the world to fulfil a broad range of humanitarian and economic objectives. For instance, in 1980 there were approximately 80,000 foreign experts working on development projects in the world's poorest continent. There is no unemployment in the development industry as few

agencies work themselves out of a job. The majority have grown from year to year with ever bigger budgets, ever more projects to administer, ever more staff for their ever-expanding projects

A little known fact is that there are at least 16 specialized United Nation (UN) agencies which can be involved in disaster relief activities. These UN agencies place a strong emphasis on the responsibilities of governments. Hence, their development approach involves the upgrading of structures, such as infrastructures, health services, education and trade. Although this approach is realistic in the sense that it takes government involvement seriously, it is probably too optimistic about the willingness of authorities to really serve all the people. It consequently exerts too little pressure in the political and social arena. In the end much of the aid lands in the wrong place. How effective is foreign top-down assistance?

Results of development activity have been minimal and often disappointing. People simply cannot be pushed into development by outside efforts. When aid becomes impersonal, it cannot bring the desired results. Someone wrote: "The tendency for those who are not poor to become mere sightseers in the world of those who are is one of the central problems of international development." For instance, the World Bank does not take time to ask the poor themselves how they perceive their needs, neither does it canvass their view on how they feel their needs might be best met. A Senegalese peasant commented after one mission of high-powered development experts had made a cursory tour of the village, "They do not know that there are people living here."

TOP-DOWN DISASTER

The UN's top-down institutional approach has been a recipe for failure. There has been a lack of involvement of the local people in the conception, planning and execution of programs. Who decides what goals are worthy? Who decides the best use of resources? Those who have the money make the rules. Since the folk who need aid the most are seldom consulted, there is a great deal of waste and bureaucracy. Grandiose development projects often turned out to be boondoggles and white elephants. Too many of even most of the well-intended "development programs" in Africa have failed. Not only did they usually lack the hoped-for results in terms of alleviating poverty and suffering, but they also failed to gain the wholehearted support of the people at the grassroots. They failed to take into account the sentiments, motivations, beliefs and customs of the people. Of the period from 1984 to 1986 when Africa was devastated by famine, Joseph Reed, a former US ambassador to the UN, had said, "We turned out resolutions while children went without food, water and medicine. We requested reports while families huddled in devastating poverty. We hurled accusations back and forth while desperate people became more resigned to their plight." In his hard-hitting, well-documented, book *Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business*, Graham Hancock argues that aid is a waste of time, that the results are fundamentally bad, and that - far from being increased - it should be stopped forthwith before more damage is done.

A notorious example is the failure to improve the lot of the ordinary citizens of the West African nation Burkina Faso. It hosted no fewer than 340 missions from the United Nations in one year. Furthermore, the foreign aid (the least questioned form of state spending) provided by France to its former colony did not bring relief to the grass-roots level. During the 1970s France spent \$ 38 million annually in aid. In December 1977, in just one day, Burkina Faso' dictator blew no less than \$ 20 million of France's taxpayers' money. He crowned himself Emperor in the presence of thousands of foreign guests, wore a \$2 million crown topped by a magnificent 138 carat diamond and draped himself in a \$145,000 robe. In 1977 his country had less than 170 miles of paved roads. The average income in the region was \$250 a year.

Why the dismal failure of so many well-intended development programs? The root cause is spiritual. The modern secular belief is that if God is dead, then man has to solve the world's ills himself. Man takes God's place. The world is bad. Man is inherently good. He can regain lost paradise in his own strength and wisdom. But secular agencies are not the only ones on the scene. In the next installment we'll focus on the theme "The Church and Development."

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