

Corruption, Instability, Power, and Destruction: The Challenges of Development

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When the United Nations set forth to create the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), they embarked on a mission to better the world. Taking on some of the most serious issues facing the international community today, the MDGs outlined eight targets ranging from eliminating extreme hunger to working towards environmental sustainability to fighting HIV/AIDS and poverty (United Nations Millennium Development Project, 2000). The MDGs required governments to take responsibility for the current state of their country and shined a light on many nongovernmental organizations that were impacting communities.

It was recognized from the beginning that many social problems are deeply connected to flaws with international development. With that in mind, the Millennium Project included “Develop a Global Partnership for Development” on its list of goals (United Nations Millennium Project, 2000). During the 15 years that the world worked on the MDGs, many development-related improvements were made – including increasing aid to developing countries, lowering the proportion of external debt service to export revenue, and increasing the strength of Internet and cell towers in order to connect more people to a global network (United Nations, 2015b). However, development work is complex and not all targets were realized; some carried over onto the United Nation’s new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda to include working toward “Decent Work and Economic Growth,” “Industry Innovation and

Infrastructure,” and “Sustainable Cities and Communities” (United Nations, 2015a). Hopefully these approaches will lead to more sustainable development for the future.

Before moving on to the next phase, however, it is vital to assess the mixed successes of the MDGs and consider challenges for development that may hinder progress toward the achievement of the SDGs. Challenges such as government corruption and instability, the power and control of nongovernment organizations, and the destruction of local cultures will continue to obstruct the success of development projects. Instead of relying on old systems of development, a different approach is needed – one that works alongside local people and governments, coordinates non-governmental organizations, and changes our definition of what makes a project successful. This paper will consider the challenges faced by development projects and question how the international community can work towards more sustainable development in the future.

Challenges of Development

Development is commonly defined “by life expectancy, adult literacy, access to all three levels of education, as well as people’s average income which is a necessary condition of their freedom of choice. In a broader sense the notion of human development incorporates all aspects of individuals’ well-being, from their health status to their economic and political freedom” (World Bank, n.d.). This definition exhibits the many types of development, ranging from economic to social development, and lays out some of the basics for an adequate standard of living. A definition of sustainable development reaches beyond these basics; sustainable development can be defined as “meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987).

Sustainable development is essential because development alone is not enough – progress must continue after one project ends, bettering communities in the present as well as for future generations

to come. Yet sustainable development in developing countries is difficult. There are many variables that come into play, including economic markets, the state of the government, war and conflict, and many other factors. Not every country has the infrastructure to operate and benefit from projects in ways that are common in the developed world, such as within countries like England or the United States. Many people also wish to preserve their local culture and traditions, and these can easily get lost on the quest to bring these “under-developed” countries up to modernized, higher levels of development. This section focuses on key challenges to sustainable development that require forward-thinking solutions: issues of government corruption and instability, the power of non-governmental organizations and other development actors, and the destruction of local cultures.

Government Corruption and Instability

Government corruption and instability are contributing factors in hindering sustainable development. Many under-developed countries are torn apart by armed conflict as powerful actors struggle for control. Political power is constantly shifting, making it near impossible to accomplish sustainable development goals such as establishing effective policies or appointing funds for key projects. Often, this is because the infrastructures for successful, functioning systems simply aren’t there. There is sometimes a severe “lack of infrastructure, [due to] deep seated corruption practices, various forms of conflict, bad governance and poor health facilities [which] cannot promote a healthy population committed to work for progress and development” (Oyeshola, 2007). When you have a government that frequently changes hands and exists in an unstable environment, government jobs are frequently not going to get done – especially if government workers are corrupt and the people believe that their resources are being misused.

The harmful effects of government corruption run deeper than simply being acts of dishonesty. Corruption impacts the whole community and its economy by inflating transaction costs, raising tax

rates, and inhibiting foreign and domestic investment. This in turn undermines the legitimacy and reputation of the government, tainting the likelihood that they will receive any form of foreign aid. In many ways, corruption can serve as the first step to leading a country further into poverty by “push[ing] firms underground (outside the formal sector), undercut[ing] the state’s ability to raise revenues, and lead[ing] to ever higher tax rates being levied on fewer and fewer taxpayers. This, in turn, reduces the state’s ability to provide essential public goods, including the rule of law” (Gray & Kaufmann, 1998). If a country cannot provide its people with necessary public services such as education, law enforcement, and welfare programs, the country may become unstable, making it susceptible to violence, conflict, and even more instability – and blocking efforts for sustainable development.

The Power of Non-governmental Organizations and Other Actors

Since many developed countries have strained diplomatic relations with corrupt governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) frequently step in to fill gaps in development needs. Ideally, they should work to help form a bridge between the government and the people, trying to ensure that the state lives up to its obligations and providing much-needed services in the meantime. However, many NGOs receive vast resources and are capable of large operations – in some cases, they have been able to form a separate, fully resourced systems that are better implemented than the public system. This can cause a stronger emphasis to be placed on the organizations to take care of the people, taking that responsibility off of the government while empowering NGOs that are not held accountable under international law. This system means that NGOs “have gained more leverage in how development efforts are shaped and implemented in the country. Yet the activities of [non-governmental organizations] may not always align with the country’s priorities” (Lee, 2011). With so much power in the hands of NGOs, weak governments are made to rely on outside organizations to provide vital resources. Because states are often not given any reason or incentive to work toward a healthier and

stable government, they continue down the path they are on, taking bribes and furthering the government corruption that has become institutionalized. Reliance on these NGOs “impedes the sustainable development and sovereignty” of local governments, and prevents them from growing themselves (Lee, 2011).

Destruction of Local Cultures

Culture is something that is passed down from generation to generation, changing but often revolving around shared identities and values within a community. People often want to retain their traditions and customs, yet in many ways development can symbolize a loss of culture as outside organizations seek to change systems and behaviors. In some cases, development work strives to make communities fit Western ideals by enacting systems of capitalism and competition. In their attempts to develop these less-developed countries and provide resources, organizations such as the World Bank and other financial institutions are often criticized for trampling cultures and forcing Western values on people around the globe.

Examples of this problem comes from Egypt and Bangladesh, where micro-finance has been criticized for harming local cultures. In Egypt, bankers, development workers, and many others have attempted to economically develop Cairo with various micro-finance schemes. This approach clashed with Egyptian cultural customs, however, because social capital is highly valued in cities such as Cairo and local businesses work together to bring in revenue. The introduction of micro-finance loans and competition has gone against this traditional system. Bankers gave out loans to help develop new businesses but, instead of adding to the revenue stream of the community, these new businesses funneled the money into the hands of a select few. Competition sprung up everywhere, since high incomes were necessary to pay back loans and interest payments. If people could not pay back the loans, their businesses closed and they were left with even more debt than before (Elyachar, 2005). A

similar case comes from Bangladesh, where organizations like the World Bank invested in local women who wished to open their own businesses. On the outside, this seemed like a good plan; not only were organizations helping the poor, but they were empowering women, as well. However, the requirements of the loan dictated that women had to follow Western business models that often did not fit Bangladeshi markets. Many businesses failed, leaving women unable to pay back loans and facing not only a mountain of debt, but also social marginalization for their failures (Karim, 2011).

Recommendations

After looking at these challenges, it is important to not get discouraged or give up, but instead work towards solutions for achieving sustainable development. My first recommendation involves working with the people in the community, whose voices are often ignored. Many times, NGOs and development agencies go into a community with the desire to bring them their own version of Western development. Beware of this savior complex – or the idea that an organization will “save” the poor if those communities will only work a bit harder to pull themselves out of poverty. Despite many good intentions, organizations frequently do not try to understand local cultures or systems, instead imposing Western ideas on non-Western societies and assuming that what works at home will be successful everywhere. Organizations should go in with an open mind and open ears, ready to work with the local people and listen to what they have to say. Ernesto Sirolli, a developmental worker who runs the Sirolli Institute, says that “the first principle of aid is respect” (Sirolli, 2012). Over the course of his years working in development, Sirolli has found that these “under-developed” communities have many young entrepreneurs with great ideas, but they are not coming forward to work with new and ongoing development projects. They do not want to work with people who come to their communities trying to take over with things like community meetings, or who impose their own businesses on local populations. Instead, locals are much more willing to work with someone who listens to what they have

to say and is open to their ideas. They may not have the connections to get their business up and running, but they are open to help from people who they feel respect them (Sirolli, 2012.)

Working with the local governments is also important for sustainable development. Currently, a “paradigm [exists that] also implies a functioning public sector with minor gaps which can be filled by NGOs, a situation far removed from reality in most African countries; and posits a government-like role for NGOs which NGOs may be reluctant, and indeed unable, to accept” (Cannon, 2000). However, instead of trying to get non-governmental organizations to take the roles of the governments, more focus should be placed on strengthening governments so they are equipped to control and manage their countries. These processes may be gradual and certainly must be collaborative, but they are necessary for sustainable communities and countries. If the international community continues to rely so heavily on NGOs, no real progress can be made toward sustainable development in many parts of the world. Governments need to “develop a national policy on [nongovernmental organizations], establish a coordinating mechanism for [nongovernmental organizations], and conduct a participatory and transparent process for identifying the country’s development priorities” (Lee, 2011). By accomplishing these things, governments can clearly define the role of NGOs, as well as determine a plan for development that the government and its people can agree on.

Lastly, the structure and coordination of NGOs needs to change. For example, in Haiti it is estimated that there are as many as 10,000 NGOs working on the ground, making Haiti the country with the second highest number of NGOs per capita (Lee, 2011). This means that there may be as many as 10,000 organizations all working towards similar goals, and all struggling for the same resources and funds. Because no one is coordinating these nongovernmental organizations, this “often leads to a duplication of efforts, wasting of resources and less accountability” (Lee, 2011). In addition, funding should not be funneled so exclusively toward NGO actions, since many organizations stipulate that grants and loans are contingent upon NGOs implementing programs (Cannon, 2000). This happens more

often than not, giving all the power to the organizations and almost none to the governments. While it is understandable that donors do not feel comfortable giving their money to corrupt governments, there must come a time when a change occurs. This requires changes at multiple levels, including within the government and within the NGO system, and those changes will require solid plans and timelines for action. As governments become more effective and less corrupt, control of development must shift from NGOs to governments and, by extension, to the people themselves. NGOs are there to provide aid and to help the governments, but they should operate on a partnership instead of being solely in control. By operating this way, development is much more likely to achieve sustainable, long-term goals.

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