

## What is Development Practice?

by

P.M.Mathew

The word 'development' has been so carelessly used, by amateurs and professionals alike, that it is difficult to make out what one really means, and what one really does on it. The traditional perception on the concept is confined to the domain of economics, where 'economic development' is considered as the all-in-all of human progress. This gradually changed over time, giving space to other aspects of development as well, both relating to the individual and the society. The 'sustainable development' agenda' brought out by the UN Conference on sustainable development(1987) need to be seen as a more broad based understanding of the theory of development, having significant practical implications.

Irrespective of the semantics, the problems of 'development' are common around the world, and naturally, in the nation states as well. Poverty, unemployment, deprivations, and poor entitlements, often cripple and isolate large sections of the population. This necessitates the convergence and synergy of a variety of professions and experience, to analyse, understand, and to shape action strategies. What is required for the practice of the so-called 'development' today is, a translation of such convergence into skills and capabilities of a specific nature. Such skills and capabilities need to be specific rather than generic. They are outside the rather narrow domains of academics, politics, religion etc. For example, an academician may think that, by organizing a serious brain storming on poverty, an action plan for poverty removal can be easily worked out. A bureaucrat may think that, such academic exercises are meaningless, and poverty can be removed exclusively through some government scheme. Religious heads, on the other hand, may negate both the above approaches, and may argue for a 'social service' approach, wherein activities such as construction of houses, free medicare etc., organised independently of the government, may lead to empowerment and poverty removal.

### **Development Practice as a Unique Skill**

There is no difference of opinion in India that action for development is important. However, the differences in view points, as above, reflects an inadequate and partial understanding of the concept of 'development practice', and the associated ambiguousness on the way forward. However, development practice, by far, is both intricate and difficult. It demands some critical skills in social engineering. These skills, by no means, are not associated and confined to any particular profession or institutions. It demands capabilities oriented towards action, preferably institutional action.

### **Is there 'Development Practice' in Government ?**

Many universities run courses on development, entrepreneurship, livelihoods promotion, etc. in an international setting. They often turn out "experts" in International Development. At the other end, many of the International Experts have gained their name not by undergoing any course in international development as such. Many of the professionals in international development, by contrast, dwell into the domain of domestic experience and perception only. Many govt. agencies, in

India, for instance, run training programs in development practice, to be subsequently employed as development professionals in government. For example, the more recent experience has been the multiplication of Mission mode interventions. For instance, many State Governments have Cleanliness Missions. The very existence of such Missions, alternatively, make a tacit declaration that the existing government system has failed to deal with the problem of cleanliness. Since the existing system does not work, officials of the same inefficient system are trained outside or abroad, to come back and work within the same inefficient system, with their old bureaucratic mind set. In such cases, the new skills are important only in class rooms. Such skills often cannot work in the real world!

The question then comes to the fore: Whose business is Development practice? Is it a subject confined to the four walls of the government? No. But, there is development practice in government as well. It would be more appropriate to call development practice as the business of the 'development practitioner'. Such unique skills are rarely found in bureaucrats who have spent a full career in government service. That explains why such persons with a bureaucratic background are a misfit for the so-called 'development sector'. Or alternatively speaking, true development practitioners quit the government service, and opt for the private sector or the Third sector.

### **Effective Development Practice**

For development practice to be effective, there is need for the presence of four important things :

- a) a clear understanding of the concept of 'development';
- b) the ability to interpret it to the local context;
- c) the ability to practice the concept of development; and
- d) a clear understanding of the concept of skills and their relevance in a specific context.

#### **a) Development: Clarity on the Concept**

What is meant by the term 'development' in a precise context? Let us think it in the context of entrepreneurship and small enterprise development. It is universally accepted today that small enterprises provide the way-out from chronic employment. This global understanding came down through the findings of the CGAP in the late 1990's, which led to the then focus on micro finance. Billions of dollars poured into the developing countries including India, subsequently leading to a train of scams. For Muhammed Yunus, micro finance meant a global view of how resources can be redistributed for the creation of new global opportunities at the bottom of the pyramid. For the United Nations, it meant a quite different view of global distribution of incomes and opportunities. These perceptions really demanded a close attention on various critical aspects of enterprise development, finance, technology, marketing and real services, which necessarily have to work in tandem. However, for a government promotional agency, for example, it really meant a huge amount of money which need to be spent before the 31st of March. For many Development Banks, it meant banking without 'development', because development is a hard nut to crack ! Or at best,

what they have understood about word 'development' is confined to the text book they have studied at the Graduate level, and forgotten long back!

### **b) the ability to interpret 'development' to the local context**

The ability to interpret the global view on development, and understanding it in a local context, are extremely difficult. Such comprehension often cannot come from a Govt. agency, to whom development is thrust upon, rather than being practiced on a day to day basis. Therefore, the local reality of development is often perceived as a simple division of the national understanding of development. The irony comes largely from the perverted national view of development, wherein, more of roads, bridges, and FDI inflows, are considered as the harbingers of welfare. Here, the questions of distribution and sustainability are immaterial. This is like considering the World Bank as an aggregations of national banks !

The fallacy of interpreting development, as above, emerges from wrong perceptions on the relationship between the Union government and the provinces in many developing countries. In India, for example, despite the long debates on Center-State relations and panchayati raj, a true devolution of resources and political power has never happened in a serious sense. Naturally, for every aspect of the economy that touches upon the lives of the common man, decision making of a participative nature often does not takes place. Naturally , for example, most of the enterprise development programs in the country are run on a top- down fashion. The poor self employment seeker looks out for realization of his dream of having a sewing machine or setting up a bunk shop, under national programs like the MUDRA or PMEGP. But before him, he finds, a bank manager with a neck-tie, talking to him of NPA, and of CIBIL . The poor fellow needs support for uploading an application under any of these schemes. He is told, at a time, to go to a chartered accountant for preparation of a project report, and to an akshaya center for uploading his application.

While the rigidities of governmental systems are common in many developing countries, what is often missing in these countries is the prevalent mistrust between government systems and private systems, relating to service delivery in an open market. Even when the doctrine of liberalized economic regimes speak of a " level playing field", the governments never allow such open markets to perform.

Despite the multiplication of public institutional structures in many developing countries as also in India, these structures, irrespective of their poor capabilities and rampant inefficiencies, do not allow the full fledged development of open markets. Naturally, real services is a real casualty for anybody who is venturing into an economic activity of his choice. Business development services is a serious critical resource, too much in short supply, in many developing countries. Governments often do not consider this as a handicap at all!

### **c) Ability to practice the concept of development**

The government has solutions to all the problems thrown up by the market. Come to us, we will take you to a government advertisement and to a public delivery system manned by personnel that are not fit for elsewhere. It is this perception of consultancy that leads to the mushrooming of post - retirement " consultants" in countries like India. Every economy has a system of using the services of retired people in a productive manner. However, the effectiveness of such a system is dependent,

both on the perception and practice of retirement. In many advanced countries, post-retirement initiatives have been promoted through *volunteering services*, both national and international (Beso in UK, SNV in Netherlands). These channels provide excellent opportunities in international development programs of these countries, as the volunteers who are not attracted by any financial remuneration, extend their services to the benefit of large and small development projects.

The situation in countries like India remain different. While social protection measures are relatively low, the otherwise favored Govt. servants are often on the look out of a so-called "consultancy" role. For example senior bureaucrats in many departments are enticed into post-retirement jobs as consultants or employees, by the private sector. Thus, many corporates manage to make use of these bureaucrats even during their active tenure in Govt. This creates a culture which has serious negative implications on the benefits of public programs of development to the common man. The beneficiaries of such programs are often decided by the consultants, through their access with the Govt. agencies, rather than by the merit of the proposal. At the other end, the fact remains that most of such "consultant" do not have any capabilities worth to be named so.

### **The Way Forward**

The discussion, as above, leads one to the need for a new approach to 'real services'. The recommendation of the Donor Committee(1997) which argues for the development of BDS markets, can be a possible solution. However, the reality remains that it cannot just happen like that. There is need for a culture of *development practice*. The title by the ILO, *How to Make use of a Consultant?*, is truly relevant in the present context. However this critical area remains least attended. The perception that Govt., by itself, need to find solutions to all major critical issues, is a fallacy of the times. What is needed is to accept and recognize *development practice* as a discipline in itself. The universities have to increasingly focus on this discipline. However, along with that, there is need for a democratic pressure on quality of governance, which will put pressure on dismantling the old and ineffective structures.

A practitioner is a person actively engaged in an art, discipline, or profession. Where 'development' is the profession concerned, the practitioner's role is, at a time, one of leadership and management. This is the logic by which, countries like the USA, encourage a cross border movement of experts across their professions, from academics, to government and to business. It is this cross-breeding of expertise and experience that helps to improve the quality of governance. It is such cross-breeding of expertise that contributes to 'evidence based policy making'. But in many developing countries, governments often do not seek after evidence, and therefore, they find it convenient to engage bureaucrat-turned 'consultants', rather than development practitioners.

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*The author is a senior development practitioner and public policy expert. Senior Fellow and Director at the Institute of Small Enterprises and Development, he can be reached at [director@isedonline.org](mailto:director@isedonline.org).*

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