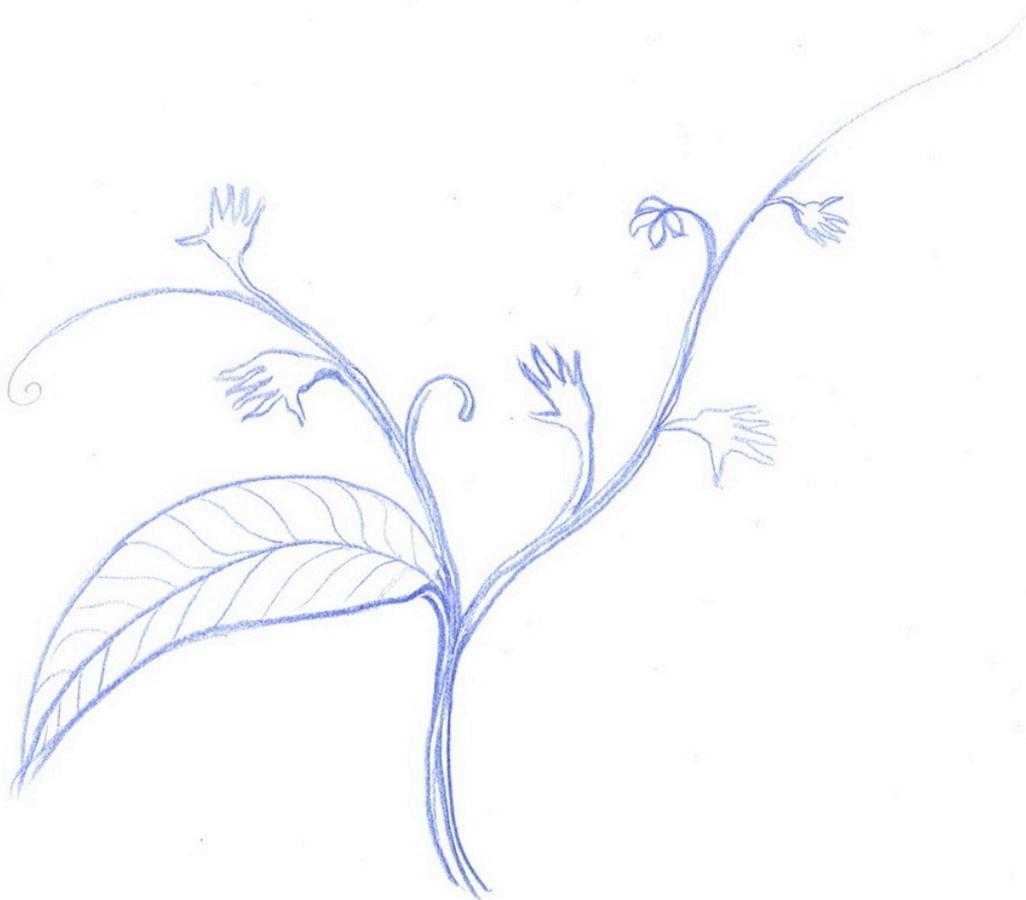# "Developmental Difficulties"

Contrasting Teachings on Development at Schumacher College with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals

"Development, What Next?"
Short Course Essay
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Developmentus Precationis
The Development Prayer Plant

Introduction

This essay compares the teachings I have received at Schumacher College in the recent course titled "*Development - What Next?*" with the United Nations *Millennium Development Goals* (henceforth often referred to as '*the Goals*'). Due to the restrictions on the length of this essay, I have chosen to focus primarily on where there are differences in ideologies between *the Goals* and the teachings I received, choosing one or two points for each goal, and sometimes reflecting on how I think a Goal may be structured better. My final comments give more of a general overview of how I see *the Goals* are working.

The Goals themselves are based on the "*Millennium Declaration",* a resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2000. This nine page document outlines the ideals that the United Nations (UN) member states collectively aspire to for all people of the world. From this came the "*Millennium Development Goals*" themselves, to be achieved by 2015. The UN has further published a more extensive report titled "*Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*", and also has a website called "*MDG Monitor*" which contains indicators showing progress towards *the Goals*. All UN goals, indicators and strategies listed in this essay have come from one of these sources.

The headline goals are as follows:

> Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty & hunger
> Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
> Goal 3: Promote gender equality & empower women
> Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
> Goal 5: Improve maternal health
> Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases
> Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
> Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

I feel that the teachings at Schumacher broadened my understanding greatly of current development issues, and I find stark contrast between some of what we have learned (especially from Vandana Shiva and Gustavo Esteva) and what I have read in UN documents. Whilst few would argue that universal human rights should be respected in every culture, even this very concept of *universal* values was questioned by Gustavo Esteva. He believes that the people of every region should have the autonomy to define their own value system.

The differences in ideology are not so apparent in the broad headline goals above, it is in the details, when looking at the definition of conditions such as poverty, and the means chosen to 'eradicate' that differences become apparent. The strategies and indicators underlying these goals are often very prescriptive, denying communities the freedom to define their own concepts of health, education etc. Should a region elect to override the UN goals in favour of their own priorities, it seems clear that it would not receive 'official development aid' readily in the current climate of international politics. The headline goals I generally see as laudable, but I question the mandate of an international body to dictate how such goals should be achieved within individual communities.

A precise definition of 'development' in the political sense I find elusive. In biological terms it refers to the growth of an organism to it's mature form. In the United Nations it seems (from looking at the indicators of its success) that development means progress towards a democratic, sanitized society well integrated into the global monetary economy and whether this is a mature form of human society or not is open to debate. However, the notion of development also implies the notion of *the underdeveloped*. Gustavo spent some time explaining to us, how humiliating and undignified he found it when president Truman in 1949 made a speech where he first spoke of bringing progress to 'underdeveloped' areas. Truman, in these few words, condemned millions of people to become known as 'underdeveloped'. By branding countries this way (or more recently as 'developing') until it becomes a household term, an insidious indoctrination has taken place where 'development' starts to be seen as

a universal panacea, as something *all* people should strive for – a concept that is not often challenged. In fact, 'development' has become seen as a human right in itself – enshrined in the *Millennium Declaration* where it clearly states "no individual and no nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development"[1].

If one looks at Helena Norberg-Hodge's descriptions of what happened in Ladakh in Northern India as the region became exposed to the western way of life and started undergoing what is known as development, one finds cause to question the concept. Helena had lived half the year in Ladakh for 16 years when she wrote her book *Ancient Futures,* and the excerpt below describes the changes that she saw.

> "In the sixteen years or so since development first came to Ladakh, I have watched the gap between the rich and the poor widen; I have watched women lose their self confidence and their power; I have watched the appearance of unemployment and inflation and a dramatic rise in crime; I have watched population levels soar, fuelled by a variety of economic and psychological pressures; I have watched the disintegration of families and communities; and I have watched people become separated from the land as self sufficiency is gradually replaced by economic dependence on the outside world."[2]

The use of such an ill-defined term as 'development' (especially one that is associated with such cultural devastation) in defining an international human right is the first, and one of the most obvious problems I see with the rhetoric associated with *the Goals*.

All cultures inevitably change, grow and 'develop' over time, with or without UN initiatives to guide them. The key is to build the health and wellbeing in the process (for all beings). Internationally agreed ideals may provide a guiding hand towards a healthier future, however I have concerns that some of the UN strategies underlying the *Millennium Development Goals* are leading elsewhere – that they are leading towards a homogenous global culture dominated by international trade and multinational corporations.

Taking the Goals One By One

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty & hunger
- *Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day*
- *Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger*

The major flaw I see with this goal is that it speaks of poverty in terms of the large scale market economy as opposed to a local or sustenance economy. Those who are not adequate consumers in the capitalist globalized economy are considered poor. One of the 'progress indicators' for this goal is "share of poorest quintile in national consumption"[3] (with the data source being the World Bank). This concept was deeply challenged in the teachings we received here at Schumacher College.

The *Millennium Declaration* encourages industrialised countries to introduce "a policy of duty- and quota-free access for essentially all exports from the least developed countries"[4]. Allowing unrestricted exports from the so called 'least developed countries' can actually increase poverty and hunger within such countries. Whilst it is undoubtedly not the intention of *the Goals* to create scarcities of food, measuring *only* national currency incomes to gauge poverty does not take into account the subsistence economy where people live directly from the land – or the sustenance economy as Vandana Shiva calls it. In her book *Earth Democracy*, she describes how "within the context of a limited resource base, diverting natural resources from directly sustaining human existence to generating growth in the market economy destroys the sustenance economy". A very current example of this is the growing of large scale crops for biofuel production, which is partly responsible for inflating food prices and creating food scarcity. According to a recent article in *The Economist*, "the 30m tonnes of extra maize going to

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[1] United Nations *Millennium Declaration*, 2000, p2
[2] Norberg-Hodge, 1992, p141
[3] All 'progress indicators' quoted can be seen at the Millennium Development Goals Monitor website, www.mdgmonitor.org, retrieved 28 March 2008
[4] UN *Millennium Declaration*, 2000, p4

ethanol this year amounts to half the fall in the world's overall grain stocks"[5]. Vandana sees a sustenance/subsistence economy as one where people can live happy, healthy lives placing little strain on the Earth, but the United Nations clearly sees it differently. Within the UN documentation this was further reinforced in sentences like "There are few jobs beyond subsistence for people who are illiterate and innumerate. A lack of education is thus a sentence to a lifetime of poverty"[6].

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling

Gustavo Esteva presents a radical view on education, and I feel certain that he would not be in agreement with this goal in principle. He believes that formal education should be abandoned altogether, trusting that it is in human nature to learn, and that knowledge is available within our communities and not just in educational institutions. He said to us in class that "to know is not to consume education, to know is to have relations with the world" and spoke of apprentice style models for learning without formal organisation. He further expressed concern over the uniformity of education, and likened a universal model of education to junk knowledge, like junk food. The Goal of "universal primary education" implies western style education for a capitalist, globalized culture and not education that is radically responsive to context and culture and designed within the communities it serves. I resonated strongly with Gustavo's idea that moving beyond mainstream education implied people taking personal responsibility again, rebuilding autonomy and independence.

This goal could easily be interpreted in such a way as to embrace Gustavo's principles, as he certainly does believe in learning and building knowledge within communities. However, I suspect from the tone of their documentation that this is not likely to be the way it is interpreted within the mindset of the United Nations currently.

Gustavo (and Madhu Prakash) also draw a distinction between 'knowing by the senses' and 'knowing by the mind'[7], with the current type of education being spread globally focussing almost exclusively on 'knowing my the mind'. They further elaborate that the mind is the realm of remembering and thinking and, as the dominant mode of knowing, that thinking "identifies reality with abstraction". The idea of 'knowing by the senses' echoes the teachings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and fit well with the teachings of Holistic Science.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality & empower women
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

Progress indicators for this goal include "proportion of seats held by women in national parliament". When asked about women's role in politics, Clare Short said to us in class "women coming into politics…have taken on male roles - unquestionably". Instead of the political culture transforming to embrace more feminine views alongside the masculine, women are transforming to fit the dominant masculine paradigm - a very shallow form of gender equality indeed, hence not showing progress towards the desired outcome at all. This leads me to conclude that if indicators are to be used, they need to be dynamic, changeable entities, fluidly responding to what we experience in our world. If an indicator proves to be inappropriate in practice, it should be able to change. Further, if indicators are to change with experience, then they need to be able to change in different regions independently, reinforcing the conclusion I am coming to that *universal* indicators and strategies are inappropriate (which is different from universal goals).

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five

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[5] The Economist, 8 December 2007, p11-12
[6] United Nations Development Programme, *Investing in Development, 2005, p84*
[7] Esteva and Prakash, 1998, p72

Whilst this is a goal that I can't imagine anyone arguing with, progress indicators for this goal include "proportion of 1 year old children immunized against measles", and no other diseases are listed as indicators[8]. Again, a universally imposed indicator seems illogical. Such a prescribed and narrow definition of what is important to child health does not allow individual communities to assess their specific children's health needs themselves. Health priorities will inevitably differ form community to community.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio

Daleep Mukarjji made the bold statement to us that "all development in confrontational". Certainly the type of development that is imposed from outside sources rather than developed from within a culture can be confrontational, but I do not agree with the statement that *all* development is confrontational. Daleep used to work in an Indian village as a medical doctor. He is Indian but his training is in western medicine and he went on to say that "you have to challenge the wisdom, a simple thing in the beginning, you tell a woman that "you immunise your children", and you tell her that " when you go home, you don't listen to the mother in law, don't listen to villagers, you start giving breast milk from the very first day."" Whilst I fully agree with life saving western medical knowledge being made available to all communities, the attitude of Gustavo in particular has made me reassess how such knowledge should be shared. Too often it seems that it is done in a confrontational way, and prescriptive international strategies will naturally perpetuate this kind of attitude. A progress indicator for this goal is "proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel". It is not clear what type of skills are deemed appropriate for this role, however, I feel relatively confident that this indicator will broadly be taken to mean those skilled in western medical health care. I'm not sure that any doctor has the right to tell someone whose advice they should take in caring for their family. I feel that all information should be made available to people in the spirit of sharing knowledge as equals, and then people can decide for themselves the appropriate course of action. For example, once a mother understands the issues around breastfeeding her children, she should be trusted to make appropriate choices herself rather than told she mustn't trust the wisdom within her village. Challenging conventions can be heathy in itself, as long as it is not done aggressively.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases
- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

The indicators for success here measure strategies as well as outcomes. For example, an indicator for effective malaria prevention is the number of children under 5 sleeping under insecticide treated bed nets. Again blanket approach, where individual communities are not allowed to choose their own methods of prevention. Personally, I would object to placing my child in such close proximity to insecticides on a daily basis. Would such objections be considered a blight on the *Millennium Development Goals*?

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources
- Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water
- Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020

Appearing here as only one goal seems like a token gesture towards, 'ensuring environmental sustainability'. Within every initiative we take the health of all beings should be considered. Thus sustainability aims could be incorporated into every Goal. The UN does have a 'Division for Sustainable Development' within their 'Department of Economic and Social Affairs'. The department this falls under reinforces the notion that the Earth is seen as a set of resources (as does the dot point including 'reverse loss of environmental resources' above). In fact, all the dot points above display an anthropocentric focus.

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[8] Although malaria other diseases are measured separately for the broader population.

A whole thesis could be written on this goal alone, so I'll not delve too much further here except to point out a couple of obvious contradictions I see.

In the interests of promoting economic development there is a focus on promoting trade from the 'least developed countries' (see Goal 8 below) and on helping land locked and island States "overcome the impediments of geography by improving their transit transport systems"[9] Encouragement of global trade and improving international transportation is non-sensical as we enter the end of the era of affordable energy (as a result of both climate change and peak oil). This strategy further undermines future sustainability by abstracting consumers from the natural environment their consumables originate from, as the following quote in a publication from *The Ecologist* supports:

> "The remarkable success of local commons in safeguarding their environments is well documented…but that success depends on more than local knowledge of the environment, respect for nature or indigenous technologies. The extent to which sanctions against environmental degradation are observed depends greatly on the extent to which members of a community rely on their natural surroundings for their long-term livelihood and thus have a direct interest in protecting it. Once that direct interest is removed – once members of the community look outside the commons for their sustenance and social standing – the cultural checks and balances that limit potential abuses of the environment are rendered increasingly ineffective"[10]

Localisation is an obvious, more sustaining alternative.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development
- Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory, includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction— nationally and internationally
- Address the least developed countries' special needs. This includes tariff- and quota-free access for their exports; enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries; cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction
- Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing States
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term
- In cooperation with the developing countries, develop decent and productive work for youth
- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies— especially information and communications technologies

The general theme of this goal is around developing international trade and aid, conditional on a country being under 'good governance'. There also appears a deliberate focus on cooperation with pharmaceutical and technological companies, which, again pushes a certain agenda and undermines the ability for local decision making.

The authors of the *Millennium Declaration* state "We believe that the central challenge we face to day is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people"[11], and further goes on to declare that efforts to ensure this "must include policies and measures, at the global level which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with effective participation". This first statement presumes that globalization is a given, although the document further acknowledges that (at present) the benefits and costs of globalization are very unevenly shared. The second statement is almost an oxymoron, since global level policies and measures are beyond the scope of genuine participatory decision making involving all citizens, and once in place are an impediment to it. Vandana Shiva sees global proposals as "necessarily parochial: they inevitably express the specific vision and interests of a small group of people, even when they are supposedly formulated in the interests of humanity"[12]

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[9] *Millennium Declaration*, 2000, p5
[10] The Ecologist, 1993, pp18-19
[11] UN *Millennium Declaration*, 2000, p2
[12] cited in Esteva and Prakash, 1998, p27

The phenomenon of globalization is another topic a whole thesis could be written on Vandana Shiva deals with this issue in her book *Earth Democracy*, where she writes that she sees no place current within her vision of an Earth Democracy for the "unnatural conditions" caused by globalization.[13]

Final Comments

As already discussed, it is the specific indicators and strategies behind the *Millennium Development Goals* that I feel are inappropriate rather than the aims of *the Goals*. To apply prescribed strategies for development to the whole of humanity discounts the plurality of cultures on this vibrant Earth. It is a system that not only disempowers and belittles local communities with over riding international ideals, but can open opportunities for exploitation by large companies wanting to secure markets for themselves under the mandate of benevolence. Blanket strategies allow for monopolization by certain industries and companies, for example, the pharmaceutical industry in treatment of disease. Further to this, with Official Development Aid specifically earmarked to meet these *Goals*, the powerful and those literate in the ways of western style bureaucracies are in the best position to gain funding over and above others.

The *Millennium Declaration*, which contains a statement of the values and principles from which *the Goals* were derived, has a very different quality to *the Goals* themselves. The declaration is a more generally statement of intent, leaving more room for interpretation by individual communities, and further contains resolutions such as "to work collectively for a more inclusive political process, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all our countries." Whilst the *Millennium Declaration* advocates participatory decision making – the goals, indicators and strategies in other documents contravene this aim by prescribing across-the-board solutions. Indicators published by the *Millennium Development Goals* Monitor website[14] often measure the means to achieve the targets as well as whether the target itself is being met, with many instances mentioned already. Such a dictatorial approach potentially shuts down dialogue and information sharing amongst professionals and communities alike, as solutions are not discussed and debated, but prescribed by international authorities. It is important to keep in mind that such multi national initiatives by virtue of their cheer scale *have to be* developed in environments that are very disconnected from the communities in which they are implemented. For this reason I see them as profoundly undemocratic.

The drafting of UN international agreements is touted as democratic because the elected governments of nation states have participated in the process. However, representative democracy still places decision making power above the level of local communities and both Vandana Shiva and Gustavo Esteva shared much more grass roots visions of democracy. Gustavo calls it 'radical democracy', and I have pulled a series of four short quotes form the *book Grassroots Postmodernism* to illustrate his position.

> "The dominant perception is that democracy is a form of government" (p154) "It [radical democracy] is not about "a government" but about governance" (p159) ""Democratic Centralism" is fast becoming an oxymoron" (p158) "Radical democracy is based on the autonomy of rural and urban commons" (p163)

Vandana calls it 'Earth Democracy'. In her book of the same name she sets out 10 main principles of Earth Democracy[15]. It is based on "the democracy of all life and the democracy of everyday life" and recognizes that all beings having a natural right to sustenance. She also advocates self rule and self governance as the foundation of Earth Democracy, with local communities having the highest authority on decision making. Her final principle states that "Earth Democracy globalizes peace, care and compassion" hence advocating some global ideals.

The need is not denied for some national or international institutions or frameworks for cooperation and decision making between communities, or for sharing and protecting resources that extend beyond national boundaries etc. However the current UN model seems incompatible with localized democracy, and I believe international guidelines need to be more ambiguous, so as to be able to resonate with a myriad of cultures and should be put

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[13] Shiva 2005, p2
[14] Millennium Development Goals Monitor, www.mdgmonitor.org, retrieved 28 March 2008
[15] Shiva, 2005, p9

forth in the spirit of sharing rather than enforcing. It would have at least been a step in the right direction if the United Nations never went any further than the *Millennium Declaration* in defining the principles they aspire to, and even this would be too prescriptive for grass roots democracy.

I see radical and embodied forms of democracy as key to building a healthy future. How we achieve these whilst still finding ways to dialogue and share on the global level I don't have definitive answers to, but I have been inspired by Gustavo Esteva to believe that a core underpinning strategy should be **friendship**.

Acknowledgements

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