

De Post2015 development agenda -some observations and recommendations-

With the observations presented below I would like to contribute to the on-going discussions and reflections about the commitment of the international community after 2015 to pursue the eradication of severe poverty, injustice and unsustainability.

Two attitudes

In my view the crises we experiencing today (economic, financial, natural resources like water and energy etc.) and that aggravate many problems in developing countries, are to a significant extent the consequence of the way in which our (post)modern, industrialized world relates to reality. Identifying that attitude will be crucial in finding fruitful ways to work globally towards a more just and sustainable world.

The distinction that Avraham Heschel, an influential American Jewish thinker, made between two fundamentally different ways in which human beings can relate to reality, provides a helpful way to indicate that attitude.¹ I draw on this distinction and elaborate it a bit further. It should be emphasized that the two attitudes are presented in an ideal typical way: in human life they will hardly be found in their 'pure' form. But opposing them helps to identify the predominant way of dealing with reality and, by doing so, of a cultural background of our crises.

Heschel calls the two fundamentally different ways in which humans can relate to reality 'manipulation' and 'appreciation.' In the latter, the individual views his surroundings as things to accept, to comprehend, to appreciate or to admire. In this view nature harbours a value in itself, is more than just a resource for human use. In the attitude of manipulation the individual views his surroundings as things to handle, to control and to utilize. The world is foremost a resource of raw material and energy to be used by human beings in their search for security and the good life. In the relation of 'manipulation', Heschel contends, things have no meaning apart from their use by humanity. Hence, there is no bond between the individual and his surroundings except utility. This attitude ultimately leads to alienation from the environment and from other people.

Scientific-technical control

The attitude Heschel indicates with 'manipulation' is strongly related to the rise of modern science and technology with its enormous power to intervene in reality and control it. Their development has brought much good and progress in many areas. But these have come with a price. The unrestricted pursuit of control over reality and use of natural resources, ignoring the limitation of natural resources and the natural balances that are essential for the maintenance of ecosystem services that humanity enjoys from nature, form an important background of the present crises of finance, food and fuel.

Development

It is not difficult to see that the mainstream thinking in development assistance roots in the same modernist view of development and progress as outlined above. (Even though the development assistance discourse contains influences of Romanticism and related view on nature conservation and ecological sustainability). We list a few central points:

- its emphasis on material economic growth and the dominant role of the market in it
- the unresolved tension between such growth and sustainability
- the anthropocentric and technocentric approach to the development of poor countries
- the idea that existing physical and social structures are essentially value-free and can be reorganised according to the preference of (the majority of) those involved. This implies the

¹ A.J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* Stanford (CA) 1965: Stanford University Press.

denial of the essential role of culture and cultural differences in understanding human beings and society.

Of course it is laudable and an ethical obligation to try to overcome (severe) poverty. But if we pursue that in the way and along the lines in which our prosperity has increased, the crises will worsen. If the 'developing countries' would get to the same kind and level of economic production and consumption as the 'developed countries', the natural resources will be exhausted more quickly, climate change will continue and cause more problems. At the same time, billions of people need a better life.

Systemic change

It will be clear by now that we need a system change in many respects. In the first place a transition from an economy based on exploitation of the natural environment and natural resources to an economy based on precaution. The economy based on exhaustion of natural resources, like fossil fuels, should be shifted into one based on renewable resources, like sun and wind energy, bio-fuel and bio-materials. Initiatives in the area of bio-economy and *cradle-to-cradle* are manifestations of this transition but must gain in volume. This also pertains to a more sustainable and ethically responsible agriculture.

In my opinion such a view should primarily depart from an understanding of reality that Heschel indicated with the word 'appreciation'. An attitude that is often found more in Southern countries than in the North. One more reason to really collaborate and learn together.

Recommendations

These observations lead to the following recommendations for the Post2015 agenda.

- We need to find a new balance between the attitudes of appreciation and manipulation; a new way of dealing with the natural resources and nature's ecosystem services.
- We need to take at heart the warning of Goudzwaard et al.² They pointed out that in industrialised countries a fundamental change has occurred in the predominant value hierarchy. The values of economic growth, welfare, happiness, security and protection of one's (group) identity have been given pride of place. If only these are realised then a just, caring, secure and sustainable society will follow. But the reverse is true. We should pursue first of all those fundamental values like justice, care, responsibility and stewardship for people and environment. This will bring forth the fruit of welfare, well-being, security.
- The new agenda needs to give the highest priority to the global partnership in building a fair and sustainable global economic and monetary system (present MDGs 8 and 7). This would provide a context for all the actors in development, the states, private sector and NGOs to collaborate in a development in the global South and North that is required to eradicate severe poverty and move towards a more just and sustainable world.
- More specific goals can and should be defined within this broader framework.
- The complexity of 'development' should be acknowledged; this means that it cannot be grasped in any specific model. Trying to understand and control development in a terms of linear causality and goal-rationality will lead to a distortion of reality and produce adverse effects. We need a methodical pluralism and a continuous search for different approaches to understand development processes and find ways to influence it positively.

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² Goudzwaard, B., M. vanderVennen, D. van Heemst. *Hope in troubled times. A new vision for confronting global crises.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2007;106.