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Microcosm and Macrocosm in Third World Development

A new shop connected with the Third World recently opened in Oxford. It is not attached to any of the established organizations devoted to development, and it has a very different atmosphere from that of the familiar charity shops. Admittedly, there are photographs of a Tanzanian co-operative on the wall, handicrafts displayed, and notices posted about development-orientated activities. But there are also mandala prints and *Catonsville Roadrunner* posters, bulk grains, sugar and beans for sale at a low price, and a large noticeboard is filled with ordinary messages and announcements about a wide range of groups and meetings. A cafe is going to be opened in part of the building, and it is already used as a centre through which to contact various local community organizations. Conversation is continual and there is a steady flow of visitors. In other words, a lot more is passing between people than is directly associated with an involvement in Third World development, and the place is engaging in itself. This alone provides an initial opportunity for an approach to the subject along different lines to that predominating in other concerned bodies.

The problems of the Third World frequently present a picture of human relationships at their most abject. Discord between powerful and weak, wealthy and poor, the dynamic and the fatalistic, those with expertise and those without it, are common elements. The danger of an unconsciously patronizing attitude to aid recipients and the likelihood of resentment on their part, is a recurrent pre-occupation of groups like VSO. And moral assumptions - convictions concerning the behaviour of people towards each other - underlie the approach of many agencies and individuals. This is obvious in the case of charities such as Oxfam, but also evident in the more political pronouncements of Judith Hart, M.P., or the Haslemere Group. And while perhaps avoiding such assertions in their academic work, many researchers in this field voice a fundamentally moral commitment in more personal discussions.

That relationships are 'important' in development might seem self-evident. But if we regard them not only in their familiar form of 'getting on reasonably well' with people, but also at their most exploratory and consummate level, as envisaged, say, in Carl Roger's encounter theory, then to what extent have their possibilities been considered in regard to the working of those agencies and institutions concerned with the Third World? That is, as achievements in themselves and thus foundations on which to operate. Remarks from individual workers, from the seemingly innocuous 'We really work under pressure here,' to 'The place as riddled with personality conflicts,' and 'I think they're (fellow workers) all round the bend,' are common enough to suggest that there may be something to be gained from this. One response might of course be that the nature of contemporary institutions is characterized anyway by a neglect of the quality of relationships and the 'real' person. But the development context is one in which the implications of this in regard to the aims of the body involved are immediate.

The promotion of material security remains the most recognizable single emphasis of

such organizations, and the fulfilment of practical requirements the first priority. Last spring's (1973) Christian Aid Week poster presented this at its least sophisticated level. In the left hand picture stood a ragged farmer with his scrubby and desolate field, his face gloomy. In the right hand one there were instead orderly rows of crops, the same farmer (after receiving aid) in new trousers and shirt, and with his face transformed by a smile. Such a conception of happiness can only be a temporary refuge from the more complex existential factors which it becomes increasingly impossible to avoid considering in 'advanced' society.

The avowed suspicion of wealth itself as an unregulated social goal underlies the outlook of most workers in this country in the development field, especially as the coming of the Second Development Decade has prompted re-assessment of the progress made in Third World countries since independence. Last year a conference held by the Institute of Development Studies (Sussex University) and the World Bank was specifically concerned with this topic, but discussed, as would be expected, in terms of desirable models of income distribution, rather than states of mind. And however diverse and subtle research may be, the research body is itself geared to output, just as the charity is geared to income and supply like the coffee plantation. Within the workings of the institution the condition of the individual and of his inter-action with those around him is automatically subordinated, even though its importance is probably acknowledged.

For the daily activities are centred on the meeting of predetermined demands, the most obvious form being the pursuit of solutions to problems. And in the development context especially - one frequently presented as reflecting the depths of neglect and misunderstanding - the notion of 'solutions' can become a monumental cart before the horse. It is exactly our tendency to respond to social situations accordingly that encourages some discordant elements to perpetuate, albeit assuming different guises as situations change and different analyses of them are provided. For the quality of attunement to the immediate shapes what demands we make and what demands are made on us.

What this assessment pre-supposes is the possibility of establishing a quite different inter-personal atmosphere, within the institution at least. That it would change the nature of working relationships and that, through a primary orientation to something outside the work in hand, it would encourage a more germane approach to it, partly because this would be a less compulsive one. Also, that it would facilitate a changed conception of one's personal needs, inasmuch as many of them now appear to have been compensation for the frayed psyche. Since the problem of resources is frequently seen in terms of indiscriminate accumulation and waste by those in advantageous positions, the interests and sometimes the fundamental assumptions of developments agencies are closely involved. But the pursuits and goals of development workers are often not appreciably different from those predominating in the society which in effect they are challenging. And the terms I have outlined seem closer to those of the 'human potential movement'. of drama therapy, touch sessions, or of work performed against a dynamic religious framework.

Indeed this is pre-eminently not the condition in which most development workers

operate. Nervous breakdowns, ill-health through overwork, emotional instability are at least as recurrent among them as among organizers or experts in other fields, certainly far more so than in a member of contemporary living situations. 'The place', said one worker of his office, 'doesn't seem to leave you enough soul to take home'. And there must be very few development workers for whom Oscar Ichazo is a Chilean as worthy of consideration as Salvador Allende. Yet the latter, simply in finding it necessary to rely on troops to re-inforce his policies (in the months preceding the coup) demonstrated the antithesis of a development integrated to the most human level. And that is where the former, through the concentrated person to person sessions of his Arica Foundation, supposedly begins.

And any institution is in danger of militating against such development, as long as it does not make specific provision for it within its running. The charity worker who, at a London meeting composed largely of whites, swept down on two African ladies in national dress with a purposeful cry of 'What a lovely costume!' again illustrates how useful this might be. Industrial and commercial corporations are beginning to use encounter group techniques for some personnel. In Steiner villages for the handicapped both ritual and the performing arts play a key stabilzing role in the conduct of affairs. But only a few groups associated with Third World development, like VOSA, the organization for returned volunteers, or *Uhuru,* the new shop in Oxford, have the incidental makings of a more deeply rooted approach. And this amounts as yet to little more than using the same room space for a variety of activities and information, or a degree of informality which encourages fuller acquaintance between participants. Even these features tend to disappear in the larger unit, and only a more deliberate approach will preserve the temperamental climate which provides support in itself.

Without this, it will be even less surprising that advancement of the Third World does little to diminish instability and tension. Certainly, the bulk of the examples here apply most directly to that side of the work carried out in this country, and often to groups who operate on a small scale. But since the emphasis is on intimate processes a beginning can only be made at the most accessible level (to recognize that side of the overall situation which is reflected immediately around one is anyway part of the principle). In some aspects, development is adding a new dimension to friction and conflict. Once we could terrorize the technologically inferior. They are increasingly in a position to terrorize us. The new-found efficacy of the Egyptian army and the power of the oil states illustrate this. Thus our well-intentioned concern for development might be made to seem quite beside the point, unless we pay methodical attention to exactly what is transmitted between one person and another.
