

If the intention is to create a better world ...

By Henrik Valeur, 2012

When we (Danes) want to describe the results of the development assistance we provide, we call it "The World's Best News".¹ Several independent observers believe, however, that the last fifty years of Western development assistance has largely been wasted and that in many places the "assistance" has impeded rather than assisted development.

A reality check is needed!

The world's problems don't seem to have diminished during this period even though there now seem to be consensus about the causes of the problems - a combination of overpopulation and overconsumption. So if the intention is to create a better world, it is this dual challenge we must deal with. And then there are two principles of current development policy we must question:

1. The poorest are most in need of development, therefore, assistance should only go to them.
2. The rural population is the poorest, therefore, assistance should only (or mainly) go to rural areas.

1. Co-Evolution

It is clear that the poor need development, but so do we, the rich. We just need to develop along another path than the one we have followed until now.

New models of sustainable development are not only needed in the poorest countries but also in the richest. Because if we, who do not really need any more, continue to demand more, why should people in the rest of the world not do the same?

And if more and more people consume - and pollute - more and more, it will inevitably lead to severe resource conflicts, dramatic climate changes and environmental disasters. Future generations may thus be born into a very hostile world.

To avoid this, development must be viewed in a larger and broader perspective, and future development policy must integrate other policy areas, including education and research, culture and environment, energy and climate, economy and business, far more than it currently does.

And then the budget should not be 1% of GDP but 10%. At least!

Though the assistance must be paid for by the rich, it does not have to go only one way. It would be better if we helped each other and learned from each other. Does that sound naive? Yes, perhaps, but isn't that the very essence of the democratic idea - the belief that together we can create a better world?

So much more thought provoking is it, that some of the most prominent advocates of co-evolution are not the ones we normally think of as representing democracy.

Leading up to the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, founder and executive chairman, Klaus Schwab, spoke of the importance of "collaborative power" and the need for more inclusive development strategies.² At a previous international summit, the Chinese president, Hu Jintao, has said that "faced with both opportunities and challenges, we must carefully think about and seriously answer the question of how to jointly build a sustainable future".³

Development assistance could play a decisive role in shaping this answer. And this could be done, by using education and research more pro-actively to promote development, exchange and collaboration throughout the world.

Danish educational and research institutions could greatly benefit from increased global exchange, which would offer students and researchers possibilities to test their ideas

(the best ones!) and to be inspired by the ideas of others.

In this way we, the rich, may also benefit from development assistance in the form of inspiration to make our own development more sustainable and in the form of more and better friendships that may open the doors to future markets for sustainable products and technologies, future centers of knowledge creation and innovation, and future capital for funding and investment.

2. Development Urbanism

Where are future markets, knowledge centers and capital flows to be found then? In cities, of course! Especially in the cities in emerging and developing regions, where the urban population is expected to double within a single generation - the next 20-30 years.

Rapid transition from agriculture to urban culture will cause tremendous changes in these countries, but there is also reason for optimism because in cities we may co-evolve. Great cities do not only concentrate many people, they also provide spaces in which divergent thoughts, ideas and experiences can meet, clash and merge.

That's why it is not surprising that the roots of Western democracy can be traced back to Athens - the first great city of the West; that the French Revolution took place in Paris - at that time the largest city in the West; or that the Arab Spring today takes place in Cairo and other major Arab cities.

Cities make us free - or at least they offer us the possibility!

Nor is it then surprising that many rulers and bureaucrats try to prevent urban migration.

Yet the growth of cities in emerging and developing regions now equals the total population of Denmark every month! They grow because they offer opportunities not only for freedom, but for employment and education, and frequently also for better health and safety, particularly for women and children. Meanwhile, overpopulation and more efficient farming methods make more and more people dispensable in rural areas.

Efficient agriculture, with fewer people producing more, is a precondition for urban development. But it does not create development by itself. It is cities, or rather, the concentration of people in cities, that create development - not just economic but also cultural, political and scientific development. This is substantiated by overwhelming historical evidence.

A current example is China. Mao focused on developing the rural areas. The result was that people remained (equally) poor. Thus at his death, the vast majority of Chinese people lived in extreme poverty. Although Deng Xiaoping had been there from the beginning, he nevertheless turned everything upside down when he - over seventy years old(!) - came to power. He focused on urban development. The result is that extreme poverty is virtually extinct in China today.

But perhaps the most important - and most neglected - argument for urbanization is that urban dwellers have fewer children than rural residents (even without a one-child policy, as in China). There are probably several reasons for this, including the fact that urbanites do not need a lot of children (because there is no land to cultivate), they are often better informed/educated and urban women often enjoy more autonomy and security.

The stabilization of population growth is crucial for sustainable development on Earth. And this will not be achieved by helping people in rural areas, because development assistance will never be able to change the fundamental reasons why people in rural areas have more children than people in cities. In fact, development assistance may often restrain the rural population in hopeless poverty, because neither will it be able to change the basic fact that it is in cities we evolve, not in rural areas.

We instinctively try to help the poor where they are and 2/3 are in rural areas. But we would help them more and the help would have more long-term effect if we instead helped them to a better life in cities. Because this is where the opportunities are. This is where the battle against poverty, misery and oppression can be won. And this is where

the battle over the environment, climate and resources is being fought.

Future development policies should take into account the co-evolutionary potentials of cities and promote collaborative efforts to improve the conditions for those moving to cities and those already living there. Not just in the poorest countries but also in the richest!

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Notes

¹ <http://verdensbedstenyheder.dk/about-the-campaign/>

² <http://www.weforum.org/content/great-transformation-shaping-new-models>

³ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t360596.htm>