

Religion, Ethics, and Development

Some Comments

NIGEL DOWER

Dimensions of development ethics

Development ethics explores the ethical basis of development by bringing out what is often implicit in development discourse.¹ Here, I explore briefly three dimensions to development ethics. First, what are the goals of development? Second, what kind of social/political order should we try to establish? Third, in what ways should we pursue our conception of development?

First, what kind of a society at all are we trying to promote in development? If, as is commonly assumed, development involves economic growth, what does that growth enable people to do or be? At one level, it is about enabling very poor people to escape from their poverty—to empower the disempowered—though, as I indicate later, exactly what empowerment is is a matter of dispute. At another level it is about enabling people generally to achieve (better) quality of life—which may be defined in religious terms or secular/liberal terms. The basic concept of development is capable of many conceptions—and the latter could be informed by religious values, even fundamentalist religious values. This issue is explored more fully below.

Second, there is the question of how the goods of development are to be achieved. This is the distributive question, often linked with ideas of equity and social justice. What is a fair distribution of the bases of well-being and how can it be achieved? Is the primary vehicle individuals acting charitably e.g. giving zakat as a religious duty, or is it various charitable NGOs enabling the poor through aid and training, as Harmsen's article in this issue well illustrates? What is the role of the state in this? Do we need a conception of social justice such as that provided by John Rawls² that requires redistributive measures like progressive taxation?

Third, there is the fundamental issue of how people are to pursue their own goals and also to pursue the goal of development itself. A general commitment to non-violence and dialogue is commonly assumed—and usually also the specific commitment to democratic values as well as strong legal protection of rights and liberties including political and

religious liberty. These are both procedural values to do with how we promote social change, but they also constitute elements of human well-being itself, as it is commonly conceived. But then of course there is always a dilemma when a society falls radically short of our conception of development as it should be. Is one then entitled to use violent means to achieve change? Here the current process of development may, on this view, require violent interventions and pressures, but its goal is a later stage of development in which there will no longer be a need for violence. This was the line taken by the ANC in pre-1994 South Africa and which is taken by Hamas in Palestine. I now explore some of the issues I have raised in more detail.

Nature of development

If development is defined minimally as economic growth or economic growth with equity, then this is consistent with many conceptions of what

In this article, philosopher Nigel Dower outlines the logical implications of the relations between religion, ethics, and development. In doing so, he shows the importance of making explicit the values, assumptions, and conceptions that inform discussions of development. Only by acknowledging that all development agendas are value-driven, is a fruitful dialogue between religious and secular approaches to development possible, even if they will continue to disagree about desirable outcomes.

a full human life consists in, whether religious or secular. It is usually combined with weak pluralist (liberal) and civil society assumptions. (a) Pluralist assumption: many different kinds of goals and life-styles are consistent with this account of development. That is, within the general framework of development, some people pursue non-religious goals, some various different religious goals, of which some could be fundamentalist. (b) Civil society assumption: what is done is pursued in

ways consistent with law, that is, non-violently, non-coercively, non-deceptively, and where public decisions have to be made, goals are pursued by dialogue and democratic decision/negotiation.

Within this framework NGOs can pursue a wide range of goals as part of civil society, where civil society is defined as commitment to particular procedural values of certain kinds (but not to the same substantive values). For example, a pro-life organization and a family planning organization may pursue different mutually excluding agendas, but if they do so non-violently and seek to get their views accepted democratically, then they are part of civil society. (We need to contrast this sense of civil society with a wider descriptive sense of civil society which applies to any non-state/non-business organization and could include the Mafia and the IRA.)

But the pluralist element can be reduced, either somewhat or greatly. A society could accept, even encourage, a wide range of life-styles but still reject certain ways of life, for instance those of homosexuals or of travelling people. A radically secular society might ban all or some religious ways of life, as we saw at least in public life in USSR's communism. A radically religious society may ban or discourage non-religious ways of life; Locke's famous toleration did not extend to atheists (or indeed Catholics). At the extreme it might ban or discourage both secular views and indeed any religious ways of life not in accordance with the dominant conception implemented by a government with the backing of (sufficient of) its citizens.

Development then is normatively based. Usually economic growth or economic growth with equity is seen as *good as a means* towards the achievement of human flourishing in whatever ways it is conceived, consistent with (a) a system of liberty in which the liberties of some are not unreasonably limited by the exercise of liberty by others, and (b) public decisions are made in an orderly and non-violent (non-coercive, etc.) way. In Western liberal democracies (and other societies like them) the framework of liberties and democratic procedures is part of the values assumed. In other societies not modelled on Western liberal democracies, there may also be liberties but less of them, and there may either be democracy (maybe in different forms), or benign autocracy. (There might of course be non-benign autocracies or tyrannies, but these would be seen as impediments to, rather than models of, development.)

An example of a Western approach which acknowledges this normative basis is Sen's well-known capability approach.³ The expansion of capabilities to be or do what we have reason to do or be of course includes the option of developing a religious conception of a good life. This is not of course value-neutral, but it is intended to allow for a wide range of conceptions of the good to be enabled by development. But development could alternatively be defined in an even less value-neutral way:

Is a liberal
education that does
not include kinds
of fundamentalism
a form of
indoctrination?



PHOTO BY SHAH MARAI / © AFP, 2006

Afghan girls work on a carpet loom in their home.

Suppose that empowerment is more about enabling people, not to do what they want, but to do what they have reason to want (though they may not know it). This is more typically what we have in mind with children and young people. Here education is about expanding our capability not merely to take effective means, but also in our goals and aspirations. But even here the non-liberal and liberal may both see their inputs as creating a richer range of values—in the one case by a fuller understanding of what one's religion calls one to do, in the other by an understanding of the range possibilities which one may choose—requiring a society in which that range of possibilities is protected by law.

An example from my society can be given which is in many respects similar to what can happen in Muslim societies including what voluntary organizations are about. A Catholic child, let us suppose, is "indoctrinated" into the Catholic faith and thereafter takes on a life of Catholic faith, never seriously questioning it. A fellow Catholic may judge that that person has been empowered to

live a fully Catholic life. Even a liberal or a person of another religious persuasion could judge that for that person that upbringing has empowered him to live a full life. However the liberal (including of course liberally minded Catholics) would probably take the view that, had the upbringing been less strict and other options made plausible, the person might well have chosen otherwise, and that, whether or not he remained a Catholic, it would have been better if a wider range of options had been built into his education. A person of another religious persuasion would either agree with the liberal or, if his own beliefs are also held in a certain exclusivist form, have wished for another religious education. My point is that empowerment and indoctrination do not mutually exclude each other.

(c) *The issue of universalism and NGOs*

Finally, we need to comment briefly on the issue of universalism implicit in NGO work. Any organization within development will, with regard to what it does, such as aid for the very poor or empowering through training, (a) be precisely committed to empowering people so as to make their own choices as to how to live (within the law/ground-rules of an organized community), or (b) do so with a view to encouraging people to adopt certain specific values and beliefs. But we need to see that, as between (a) and (b), they are both working with universalistic agendas. There is no problem with an organization having a universalistic agenda. This is in my opinion built into the very logic of ethics and certainly any ethical basis for an organization pursuing public policies. The real question is *what* universal values are being pursued—e.g. the expansion of choice and capacities or the promoting of more specific ways of life and belief (or positions in between with both elements, like those committed to development but with strong commitment to environmental consciousness). There are also background universalistic commitments, at least for those associations which see themselves as part of a civil society. These are commitments to the procedural values of proceeding in an orderly, non-violent non-coercive way, and often additionally to democratic procedures as well. These are universalistic as well, as is made explicit when we accept the idea of *global* civil society.

Notes

1. The theme of this short paper relates to the conference held in Utrecht on 14 June 2007 on Muslim NGOs in the Middle East, organized by ISIM and co-sponsored by Hivos. It is partly based on my comments on other papers at that conference, and partly based on reflections I had made on Egbert Harmsen's thesis on NGOs in Jordan. This paper does not make any direct contributions specifically on NGOs in the Middle East, but it provides a wider conceptual framework for thinking about development and how it relates to religion.
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
3. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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development is the expansion of the material basis (wealth) so that people can achieve more specific goals such as a particular form of religious faith. It is still development, but development defined in more precise normative terms than usually in liberal societies. Sustainable development and ecological conceptions of development also have built into them further substantive values to be achieved, so that insofar as these are adopted in Western countries, development is less simply linked to the expansion of freedoms.

Within the religious framework, an NGO is more or less free to pursue a range of goals: e.g. poverty relief as such, empowerment by providing training; and doing these things but with a view to encouraging a certain set of ethical or religious values, as Harmsen's thesis shows many NGOs in Jordan clearly to be doing. Some it may be said are engaging in indoctrination. But this does not make it inconsistent with development, though it may be something which others may prefer not to happen, either because they would prefer something else to indoctrinate or because they reject indoctrination as such. They may have rival *conceptions* of development, though the basic concept of development applies.

Several points about indoctrination

(a) *Different views of indoctrination*

We may recall here the old proverb: "one man's meat is another man's poison." What counts as indoctrination for some may be the imparting of reasonable knowledge for another. Is a liberal education that does not include kinds of fundamentalism a form of indoctrination? What counts as indoctrination depends upon whether one thinks about the range of values and beliefs imparted as being either too narrow or simply wrong, compared with what one thinks is the right set of values and beliefs to impart.

(b) *Is in any case indoctrination necessarily not empowering?*

There are two ways of thinking about empowerment. First, empowerment may be enabling people to do what they want but do not have the material or motivational resources to do. This could be (weakly) giving people greater power over their lives so that they can choose to do what they want—e.g. greater access to resources. Second, it could be (more strongly) giving people the motivational resources to be able to make genuine choices of different *ends*, including what they had wanted but also new things they might now want.

Now indoctrination is consistent with the first level of enabling, but not with the second. But the first form of enabling may be all that is seen as desirable. This is precisely a key difference between non-liberal and liberal views of education. But they are both about empowering people to lead fulfilled lives.