

The Ecumenical Movement and Development

The role of personhood

John Klaasen¹

Abstract

This article is part of several contributions that was presented at the 2015 Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS). The conference theme was undergirded by the theme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) assembly in Busan, South Korea and the recent Encyclical of Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church; “Together towards life”. The specific contribution of this article lies with the role of personhood in development. The question that I seek to address is to what extent the influential models of development proposed by Korten and more importantly, the ecumenical movement, can do justice to the category of personhood. A secondary question is the complex process through which people come to accept responsibility for addressing their situations.

Keywords: Ecumenical Movement, development, personhood, responsibility, mission, poor, agency

Introduction

At the 2015 Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS) conference at the University of Free State, delegates from a number of universities and colleges came together to discuss and reflect on the social and economic progress made in South Africa. The debate was undergirded by the theme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) assembly in Busan, South Korea and the recent Encyclical of Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church; “Together towards life”. The theme, “Together towards life”, is part of the new policy document of the World Council of Churches. The title of the document is *Together towards life: Mission and Evangelism in changing landscapes*. The theme of the Southern African Missiological Society conference is also central to Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* and the challenge of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches’, entitled, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

Contributions ranged from the role of leaders, shalom, unity, church, evangelisation, those on the margins and worship. My own interest is situated within the development debate. Secular debates on the term development emerged especially since the aftermath of World War II and the introduction of the so-called Bretton Woods institutions (includ-

¹ Dr John Klaasen is a lecturer in The department of theology and religion, Arts Faculty, at the University of the Western Cape. He can be contacted at jsklaasen@uwc.ac.za

ing the World Bank and the IMF) to address the unequal relationships between the First World and the so-called Third World. Many different models of development emerged, so that various qualifiers such as “economical” “human”, “social”, and “sustainable” were added to the term development. In the South African context, the term development was widely regarded as problematic, given the introduction of the term “separate development” in the 1960s. Nevertheless, with the advent of democracy the term gained secular prominence with the introduction of the Reconstruction and Development Programme in 1994, the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 and, more recently, the National Development Plan (2011).

Development became “the dominant metaphor to capture the aspirations of South Africa’s people as a consequence of the political changes that took place during the early 1990s and the country’s subsequent transformation from an apartheid to a development state. This change in the official and popular mindset was perhaps nowhere better illustrated in the early history of the country’s transition than in the “Reconstruction and Development Program” (RDP). The RDP also served “as the African National Congress’s (ANC) election manifesto for the first democratic elections in 1994 . . . it spelled out a vision for the total transformation of South African society” (eds. Swart, Rocher, Green and Erasmus 2010:17). It is no co-incidence that religious communities, and especially the church, have made development in various forms the focus of its missionary activities.

One may observe that, despite the contested nature of development elsewhere in the world, the reality of economic and social inequalities prompted an intuitive recognition of the need for some or other form of development. The theme of development has elicited considerable ecumenical interest at least since the world conference on Church and Society held in Geneva (1966) and Uppsala (1968). Subsequently, the WCC and the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace established a joint exploratory committee on “Society, Development and Peace” (SODE-PAX), indicating that human development, based on social justice, self-reliance and economic growth (as the means of promoting the other two), was a major priority for the ecumenical movement. The WCC also established a Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development (CCPD) in 1970. However, since the 1970s the secular controversies over development have also stimulated debate in ecumenical circles. In the context of liberation theology, feminist theology and later postcolonial theology, the very use of the term “development” was challenged, since it was regarded as compromised upon the assumption of sustained economic growth and Western prescriptions for “economic development” in the so-called Third World (Klaasen 2013:182-183).

My own interest lies with the role of personhood in development. The question that elicits my interest is to what extent the influential models of development proposed by

Korten and more importantly, the ecumenical movement, can do justice to the category of personhood. Furthermore, I am interested in the complex process through which people come to accept responsibility for addressing their situations. This question “is based on the intuition that personhood may well be crucial for any notion of development, precisely in impoverished contexts. Even where people are made aware of their opportunities and capabilities and where the obstacles thwarting development are removed, that would not necessarily translate into accepting responsibility. There is a gap (widely acknowledged in ethical theory) between knowing what is right and doing what is right. It is here that reflection on the category of personhood, if understood within the context of interpersonal relationships, may be crucial” (Klaasen 2014:72-73). This may also be where theologians can offer a distinct contribution and particularly where the church’s mission can be contextualised.

The notion of personhood does not refer to the development of a distinct personality in each person or indeed to the more generic process of personal development (coming to maturity), namely where a person comes to accept role and other responsibilities on the basis of holding together particular values, a sense of priorities, needs, interests and claims to attention. In each of these instances the focus is on the development of a particular identity that distinguishes an individual human being from others or a particular community from other communities. A theory of personal development (including faith development) would then abstract from particular constructions of identity in order to identify generic features. The notion of personhood that I use is closely associated with Menkiti and Tutu’s notions of personhood. It is helpful to draw a difference between the dominant Western notion and African notion of personhood. The Western notion of person is characterised by a sole feature of the individual that is normative. On the other hand the African notion of person is embedded within the ontological and epistemic community. In the former notion, rationality and individual freedom has been the dominant characteristics of personhood. An African notion of personhood is marked by the various phenomena that impact the individual. This includes community, although there is various degree of community within the notion of person. The African notion of person also implies a processural dimension. A person is not born with personhood, but grows into a person. There are certain processes that must be followed in the quest to become a person.

My assumption is that one of the crucial factors that enables a person to develop such personal integrity and thus to accept responsibility is an understanding of what being a human being entails. In this study, the category of personhood will be used to describe such an understanding of being human. This would include at least a notion of being related to others, self-respect (including human dignity) and a sense of a common humanity (ubuntu).

Korten and development

The work of Korten has been influential in both secular and theological approaches to development. Korten defines development as social transformation or social development which is used interchangeably (Korten 1981 and Korten 1983). Korten uses the phrase as meaning much more than economic sectors whose main aim is increase of income. For him the phrase refers to “a more powerful idea—that people are the central purpose of development and that human will and capacity are its most critical resource” (Korten, D.C. and Alfonso, F.B. eds. 1983:201). Social development has three core characteristics: Firstly, the planning of development projects must be people centred. Secondly, people are also actively involved in the development process, including determining the outcomes. The poor could be referred to as exercising agency. The third characteristic of social development has to do with the acquiring of knowledge and the structure of the relationship between the affected people or the beneficiaries, the skilled personnel or infrastructure or organization and the plan or program (Korten 1983:213). “To overcome the global crisis it is necessary to renew our vision of who we are and what we hope to become” (1990:6). Who we think we are is fundamental to Korten’s development paradigm in generations two and three. Generation four reflects an even more deliberate focus on the persons. This is symbolically presented as the Earth Community story. It has the following characteristics: It is about turning the fundamental aspects of human activity around from dominator to relationships of partners. The first turning point is to replace the cultural values of money and material abundance to life and spiritual fulfilment. Exclusivity, domination and limitation as cultural and spiritual values are replaced by diversity, relationships and possibilities. Economic well-being as material productivity, oppressive policies to benefit the rich, economic plutocracy, the limit interpretation of rights as ownership is replaced by the health of families, policies that ensure all people have access and benefit from the production, truth democracy, generosity and the responsibility to be good stewards. The political turning is about democracy of people instead of democracy of money, active citizenship instead of passive recipients, commitment to cooperation instead of selfish competition and social order by consensual responsibility and accountability instead of coercion (Korten 2006:22 and 2006:79). Many of the themes in Korten’s approach to development correlates with that of the ecumenical movement’s approach post world war two.

The ecumenical movement and development

The ecumenical movement, although a latecomer to the development debate, is probably the most comprehensive attempt by the religious community to engage with the development debate post World War II. The concept that expressed the

shift in the church's focus from the social problems of the West and the East to the nations of the North and South is referred to as development. This shift in the ecumenical movement resulted in a fundamental different approach to the mission of the church. Development encapsulates not only a fundamental theme in the debate of to the mission of the church, but it also provides concrete context to the mission of the church within a changing global landscape. Three factors gave rise to the growing interest and prominence of the term development: Firstly, between 1945 and 1970 no less than fifty nations obtained independence from colonial powers or became sovereign states. Secondly, the new technologies, political freedom and increasing dominance of a scientific worldview increased the expectations to ensure human and civil rights and social justice for individuals and nations. Thirdly, the growing tension between the so-called super powers was intensified by the US Marshall Plan for the war torn states (Dickinson 1991:268). It is these factors that influenced renewed reflection on the role of the church after two devastating world wars. The ecumenical movement attempted in various ways to contribute to meaningful engagement in order to rebuild the countries that have been devastated by violent conflict and false superiority. Within the ecumenical church the efforts to rebuild has become known as development. This article primarily seeks to explore how the category of personhood is addressed in the theological discourse on development with special reference to the global ecumenical discourse. I further content that personhood plays an important role in any discussion about development.

Development and Geneva and Uppsala

The first major deliberations by the church about development happened at the Geneva 1966 World Conference on Church and Society. At this gathering of leading Christian leaders, theologians and denominations, various interpretations of the meaning of development and the process towards comprehensive development were debated. Some delegates claimed that development is project orientated or that it is the church's involvement in charity, while others interpreted development as systemic political and social transformation. These juxtapositions were influenced by the economic emphasis prior and leading up to the conference. It was also the first time that such a large contingent of delegates from the Third World was present. The widening gap between and within the rich and poor countries also influenced the debate of development. This is evident in the title of the section that dealt with development, "Economic Development".

Economic growth was also synonymous with development at the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968. Although the prefix "Social" was added to the title of the section that dealt with development, "World Economic and Social Development", the focus remained on economic growth. The Uppsala assembly "empha-

sized the need for changes in international economic structures and the responsibility of rich nations to provide more and better terms of trade, investment and appropriate technology” (Itty 1974:7).

Dickinson (1991:270-271) lists seven reasons why these earlier approaches of economic development, as identified in the two ecumenical consultations, was challenged as the most meaningful development by the ecumenical movement: Firstly, such an approach focuses too narrowly on economic development and neglects the social, cultural and religious aspects of social transformation. Secondly, closely related to the neglect of non-economic factors is the absence of the concrete well-being of the people at the expense of abstract economic and political ideologies. Thirdly, the gap between the rich and the poor was widening because of the self-interest associated with the have's at the increased impoverishment of the have not's.

Fourthly, the illusion that gross national product and per capita income should be the yardstick for development has come under attack within and outside the religious community. “[T]he experience of many countries in the Third World showed that, in spite of certain increases in GNP during the first development decade, the lot of the vast majority of the poor, instead of improving, was actually worsening. The increase in GNP largely benefitted the already rich and the middle class in those countries, resulting in increased social inequalities and economic exploitation” (Itty 1974:7). Industrialization, coupled with the inescapable advances of technology, has failed to close the gap between rich and poor countries and the development of the poor in the developing countries. Despite the efforts of the so-called Bretton Woods institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the developing countries have not shown significant growth. These institutions adopted a universal approach, which end was a greater GNP through the provision of technical support, technological information sharing, loans and other forms of aid. This is commonly known as the “Modernisation Theory”. Some of the most serious consequences of the modernisation theory include dependency, loss of fundamental societal structures, loss of creativity and imagination, depleting of both renewable and non-renewable natural resources and the dehumanising through the false dichotomy of the private and public person.

Fifthly, many theologians, through ecumenical reflection, came to accept that the status quo has been maintained in the name of development. They became so critical of development that the actual term all but became replaced by liberation in large parts of the ecumenical world. Sixthly, the growing loss of renewable resources and non-renewable sources through maximum production raised questions about the long-term effects of material development. Relations between human beings and the rest of creation and amongst human beings were replaced by greater production. This gave rise to renewed reflections on the fundamental

theological notions of what it means to be a human being created in the image of God. Does being human means to flourish materially even at the expense of meaningful relationships? The seventh limitation with the development approach is the failed attempt to implement a centrifugal or centre-periphery approach (Shils). This approach did not filter development down to the poor but instead enriched the already prosperous section of the nation(s).

These limitations points out a crucial neglect by the ecumenical church's approach to development. The approach fails to acknowledge the role of personhood in development. The emphasis on technology, economic capacity and industrialization denigrate the human being to a mere means to an end. The end for the poor was a greater GNP and for the rich countries economic monopolization. The gap between the rich and the poor and within the poor nations became bigger. This increasing discrepancy resulted in more hostile relationships between and within nations.

Development was equivalent to the GNP of the nations of the First World. "For the West, development meant modernisation (cf Bragg 1987:22-28). The entire project was, however, based on several flawed assumptions: it supposed that what was good for the West would be good for the Third World also (in this respect, then, it was culturally insensitive) between the human subject and material object and believed that all the Third World stood in need of was technological expertise...and it operated on the assumption that nothing in the rich North needed to change As late as 1968, the Uppsala WCC Assembly-in spite of its radical political stance on many issues-could devote an entire section (111) to 'World Economic and Social Development' and produce a report (cf WCC 1968:45-55) which appears to be almost oblivious of the fact that the entire development philosophy had been challenged fundamentally" (Bosch 1991:433-434). Something fundamental to the Christian understanding of what it means to be made "in the image of God" (Catholic) or "in the likeness of God" (Orthodox) is misrepresented. It is as if a human being and human beings amongst themselves is divided beyond redemption. On the basis of the approach of development, a greater GNP can restore the commonness of humanity. This approach has caused a greater division of humanity.

Humanity was regarded as a mechanically operated entity that can be controlled by external forces. Human beings are nothing more than the result of a successful economic and technological system. To be human is to be materially successful and technologically innovative. To reverse the plight of those on the margins means incorporating them into the centre of the economic activity and equipping them with advanced technology; in other words, human beings are not the subject of development. Human beings are also not the means to development. The Uppsala Report clearly alludes to this misconception about being human.

Development and Montreux

Whereas the approach at Uppsala was characterised by economic development and processes, procedures, laws and structures that promote greater GNP, a shift was noticeable at Montreux in 1970. In an attempt to approach development from a perspective that is more comprehensive, or at least from a perspective that is more than just economics and technology, a different strand of development emerged. At Montreux, Parmar suggested a three pronged approach to development that includes economic growth, self-reliance and social justice. Whilst economic growth remains the goal of development, it is the manner in which growth is determined that ultimately changed the course of the development debate in the ecumenical movement from the mid-seventies.

The WCC and the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace established a joint exploratory committee on "Society, Development and Peace" (SODEPAX), indicating that human development, based on social justice, self-reliance and economic growth (as the means of promoting the other two), was a major priority for the ecumenical movement. The WCC also established a Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD) in 1970.

This strand of development continued, although slightly differently, at The Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi 1975. This became the gathering that changed the debate of development within the ecumenical movement. Social justice became the means by which economic growth can be regarded as the root of development. Economic development based on growth at all cost was rejected and replaced by economic growth within the context of participation by the economically deprived section of society. In other words, development is not about economic growth through production, but economic growth within the context of changed institutional structures and value systems. People became central to the development debate. Parmar, formerly Assistant Director of the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, captured the new direction by claiming that "[d]evelopment is a means to human welfare; it is not an end in itself. Man (and woman) is more important than social processes. But if efforts for development are to bear fruit these processes must be allowed to shape the values and structures of society... Eradication of poverty and economic stagnation necessitates structural changes" (1967:353).

People take a central place within this notion of development, unlike the exclusive principle of growth prior to Montreux. The people become an important means of production and the manner in which distribution will take place. Because the rich has been at the receiving end of production and the distribution thereof, the ecumenical movement had to seriously consider the role of the poor. The participation of the people here referred to the poor and the marginalised. "For it was not simply participation in general that emerged as a priority, but participation by the marginalized and oppressed people who had too often been written off" (Dickinson 1991:271).

This new emphasis in the development debate elevated distribution above production and in an even more damning manner described real distribution to be egalitarian. The new emphasis and especially the notion of participation shift the focus away from exclusively economic to ethical and political indicators (Swart 2006:45-46).

The emphasis on the poor and marginalised is also recognised in the critical approach to the imposed structures and policies of the industrial nations on the developing nations. “Here the deficiency of mainstream dominant strategies to bring about a process of authentic development was pointed out. It was stressed that such strategies do not take the distinctive and peculiar situation of developing countries into account and that they remain structural and policy frameworks that are imposed upon these societies from outside” (Swart 2006:49). Policies relevant to trade, technology, the environment and labour need to take on a different structure. Policies need to consider both the intra and inter structures of the developed and developing nations. Instead of merely an economic approach, a political-ethical approach needed to be considered seriously.

One initiative by the World Council of Churches that demonstrates a political-ethical approach to self-reliance is the establishment of The Just Participatory and Sustainable Society (JPSS). This was started shortly after The Fifth Assembly in Nairobi. While the Western approach to justice was based on the Roman notion of *justitia*, the JPSS approached justice from the Old Testament and the later New Testament notion of justice as righteousness. Justice in the latter case delineates the abstract, atomistic distributive justice in favour of “justice means the vindication of the poor and oppressed and the societal dimensions of justice are reinforced” (Mulholland 1988:4).

Not only has the attention shifted to a greater centrality of people, even to be more specific, the poor, but the participation of the poor towards their own means and manner of development took on a prominent position. The poor takes responsibility for their own development by identifying the needs, manage resources and determine the future.

Personhood as interrelatedness of relationship, self-respect and justice

De Gruchy rightly claims that identity includes both the “who” (image of God) and “do” (the response of the poor to the *Missio Dei*). “It is important to recognise that in both creation accounts in Genesis, from which the affirmation of identity is traditionally drawn, the truth of being made in the image of God (1:27) or being filled with God’s own breath (2:7) is immediately coupled with the theme of vocation, the calling to be responsible actors in this world newly created by God (1:28; 2:15)” (2003:24). The two components of Korten’s social transformation, people and their involvement together with their relationship with the environment and the

ecumenical movement's emphasis of the poor and their responsibility towards the environment (as at Montreux 1970) resonates with De Gruchy's claim.

Korten demonstrates relationship when he describes the relationship between the poor and the ecological system. According to Korten, one of the motivations for making the poor central in development is the natural relationship between the poor and the ecological system. Arguing that the poor depend on their immediate environment for their livelihood more than the rich, Korten claims that development needs and planning can be best done with diagnoses of the poor's interaction with the environment. Unlike post-industrial development and modern development paradigms' preoccupation with two singular categories of variables, that of the developed and underdeveloped, industrialized and non-industrialized and modern and ancient, the poor contributes to a more accurate analysis of the dependent resources and its usages, as well as the causes of poverty. Poor households have become critical agents in the search for alternative paradigms for development. The poor has now become more than "faceless aggregate statistics, but rather people, innovative and hardworking, a potentially productive development resource-if the major constraints they faced could be relieved".

The poor could be referred to as exercising agency. Although Korten does not use the term agency, he uses voluntarism and citizen action as two notions of agency. Agency is here referred to as the poor to be actively involved and not just the passive recipients who depend on the generosity of others including bureaucratic, technological and scientific theories and systems. Whereas the latter is production centred, the former is more comprehensibly agency centred. Personhood is not about the domination or isolation of human or non-human communities as products or commodities, but it manifests itself in relationships of mutual enrichment, mutual care and mutual responsibility (Klaasen 2013:191).

Parmar has a slightly different perspective, but makes the same point when he replaces self-reliance with self-respect. In the context of the widening gap between the rich and the poor nations, Parmar claims that the developing nations can never approach development from the "catching up" element to achieve a reasonable measure of growth in per capita income compared to the affluent nations. He gives four reasons for inadequacy of the "catching up" element: Firstly, it creates frustration and a sense of incompetency of the developing nations. Secondly, there is a lack in realism. At the time (and the situation is even more dire now), the environmental conditions did not project a more favourable national or per capita income in relation to development. Thirdly, using the norms and values of other nations to evaluate one's own growth creates a sense of subservience and dependence. Fourthly, the developed economies encourages a high consumption rate and for the developing nations to imitate such an approach (1967:356-359).

Relationships and self-respect is intertwined with justice. Mulhalland rightly observes that after the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi, “[i]n the light of the experience of many churches all around the world, the WCC became convinced that participation and sustainability could not exist without justice, and that the struggle for justice demand a praxis of participation as well as ecological responsibility, and an informed confrontation of structures and powers which threatened the future of humankind” (1988:5).

Here is a clear indication that human beings, as both persons and in terms of responsibility, define themselves in the context of justice. It is ultimately the involvement of people in their own development and the shape of their future that determine effective development. This is along the same lines to say that the kinds of relationship that human beings have with each other and the rest of creation contributes to development. Robinson refers to the notion of justice in the Old Testament as “a relational concept which raises the question of right relationship with God and with God’s people. Wherever Old Testament prophets found irregularities in the society, wherever they found abnormal relations such as dominance, oppression and exploitation, they immediately raised the question of justice” (1994:318). Structures and policies that enhance a reciprocal relationship and common values can support just production and equal distribution.

The model of development within which the role of personhood can be placed is the “conscientization approach”. Dickinson claims that people’s participation in development must emerge from a new awareness of the capacities and rights of people. This awareness cannot come from outside or foreign entities, but from the capacities and potentialities from within the person that is locked up or blocked by external and internal forces. “Conscientization, therefore, is a process which enables people to analyse their own situation, understand their own alienation, not only primarily from others, but from themselves. They must discover their individual and corporate power, and act towards the creation of their own future” (1975:66).

Conclusion

The development debate within the World Council of Churches has not made significant strides since the 1980’s. Swart points out that “only a small number of scattered writings in contrast to the rich stream of publications on the subject of development during the 1960s, 1970s and to a lesser extent the earlier part of the 1980s”. This does not mean that the development debate has disappeared from the ecumenical discourse. The debate has taken on different forms and Swart reminds that “[a]s an overview of the small corpus of ecumenical writings on development over the last decade suggests, recent ecumenical reflection on the theme of development seems to follow old familiar tracks. This is, for instance, evident from a number of contributions in the 1994 issue of *The Ecumenical Review* that focus rather on the subject of ‘ecumenical diakonia’ (Vol. 46, No. 3.)” (2006:87).

Apart from the lack of academic resources allocated to development within the ecumenical movement (WCC), the neglect of the role of personhood has stifled the development debate. There is certainly evidence of the role of persons in their own development as I tried to point out by means of this short survey of the debate within the World Council Churches and especially with reference to the Geneva (1966), Uppsala (1968), Montreux (1970) and Nairobi (1975). The approach at Geneva and Uppsala was from an economic perspective with the focus on the role of the developed countries. Industrialization, technology and production were the focus. These became the means by which people would be developed. People were the recipient of development. This led to a producer and receiver process by which the rich provides and the poor remain dependent. At Montreux and Nairobi this approach was challenged and people became more than the passive receiver. While economic growth remained the main focus of the church, the people, and more specifically the poor, became a main role player in their own development, or at least the idea was that development had to take serious the sustainability of any development efforts. The Latin American expression of the ecclesia as the "church of the poor" influenced the shift from a top-down to an egalitarian approach by which the poor affirms the missionary agenda of the church. Ideas and values take precedence over economic policies and projects.

The development debate has not been exhausted, despite the decrease of emphasis by the ecumenical movement. Economic and social deprivation has increased amongst the poorest people and the situation is not getting better. I suggest that one of the core elements in the quest for development that of personhood, can contribute to a more robust and encompassing approach to development. Relationships, self-respect and justice are significant tendencies for development. It is here that the church and theologians in collaboration with social sciences can make a contribution to the development debate.

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