Getting Development Aid Equipped for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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Abstract

The United Nations has recently begun developing its Post-2015 Development Agenda, grounded in respect for universal human rights, reflecting the widespread understanding that poverty-reduction objectives need a higher profile and a commitment and willingness befitting the global challenge of sustainable development. Achieving the effective implementation of this will require major changes and a thorough disentangling of the development assistance nexus. This article discusses the main implementation challenges and provides a framework, counter to the routine terms of reference with which the development industry has been operating within its TINA (there is no alternative) worldview. A strong case is made about the importance of a development industry breakout from the prevailing, engrained path of normal 'professionalism' with its quest for 'status quo. It is asserted, and deplored, that within the development industry, the ideal of sustainable development has become a moth-eaten banner, an emblem in its final misery and a simple catchword. The paper tries to explore what we can actually know (as researchers or practitioners) about what kinds of aid work and discusses needed changes in order to make aid work better. Clearly, today's global challenges cannot be approached in silos: progress in all of them is required at the same time. There is a need for holistic learning approaches that take into account the issue of sustainability in all its dimensions. The paper underlines the importance of credible means to implement the future agenda so that development truly benefits the people. Therefore, it presents a longitudinal, descriptive analysis which can serve as a basis for an informed analysis of the routines and mainstream frameworks within which the development industry operates. It points to a number of historical examples that show how learning has been stymied, and valid criticism and good ideas have been washed away by a flood of "buzzwords and fuzzwords", and represents an effort to offer fresh perspectives and alternatives for development assistance, in order to prevent it from continuing in the same old track. Fragmented and uncoordinated projects based on donors' own policy priorities, according to engrained systems, must not be allowed to continue. Finally, it is concluded that the new development agenda requires the development industry to adopt a learning attitude, institute changes, and find new practices that can stand up to, and ultimately meet, the challenges of a development agenda for sustainability.

1. Introduction

This paper follows a pragmatic tradition and focuses on how organizations acquire, share, and use knowledge to achieve organizational goals. The author works in the tradition of learning organizations theorists. This implies that he, unlike many of his academic counterparts, uses an array of techniques and tools for doing diagnostics, i.e. examining patterns of behaviour in organizations, and also engages in 'transformative thinking'. The approach is normative, as it is based on a strong set of underlying values. It laments that the development industry has been working in a very fragmented way and that it has been guided by an utterly misguided development paradigm. There has certainly been lots of criticism and and debates. However, the debates have largely taken place within individual 'silos'. Therefore, neither the criticism nor the debates have managed to create any understanding of 'the larger picture' concerning the merits of various modes of provision of development assistance.

As a pragmatic starting point, the paper presents a kaleidoscopic picture of the performance of the 'development nexus' and the thinking within it. A systems approach is used to identify essential linkages and to organize the picture into a pattern that exposes some important but understudied mechanisms that can help the reader open the eyes and start seeing the problems and challenges that the industry has been facing. Among other things, the paper discusses whether and how on-the-ground implementation of development programs and interventions match up with official strategies and objectives, and critically reviews the means by which development institutions define and measure development success and aid effectiveness. The paper then presents some strategies that could serve to help the development industry revise and renew its approaches in order to make aid more supportive of sustainable development and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. It is, for instance, emphasized that development programs need to become more inclusive and responsive to the needs, ideas, and desires of the poor. The need to build on expertise and experience from the 'Global South' is also stressed, as is the importance of creating 'new imaginations about the public sphere'.

At the outset, the key issues of Sustainable Development [1] were to end poverty, to strengthen democracy, and to promote a fair distribution of resources (within and between generations). A key message was "Some for all rather than more for some".

However, the concept lost much of its initial meaning as strong lobby groups managed to influence its definition, and got the concept translated into the language of the dominant scientific-economic paradigm, according to which economic growth is the overriding objective and almost all growth will ultimately benefit the poor. The message essentially became "More for some". Thus, there is a need to address how this distortion of the concept has incurred a loss of opportunity to engage in an inclusive discourse around the notion of development, based on values that lead to progress in all its varied facets [2].

Until now, development has evidently failed as a socioeconomic endeavor, and it has become of paramount importance to liberate ourselves from the mainstream thinking's dominion over our minds [3]. To this end, the United Nations system has embarked on the development of a Post-2015 Development Agenda, which can be seen as a major effort to revive the original meaning of the concept of sustainable development. As a basis for the new agenda, there were a series of wide-ranging consultations that emphasized that this new agenda be built on human rights and universal values of equality, justice and security. Principles about participation, inclusion, and the need for strengthened capacities and partnerships emerged repeatedly [4].

The post 2015 agenda, thus, needs to be grounded in respect for universal human rights, and reflect a commitment and willingness befitting the global challenge of sustainable development [5]. It needs to vividly defend the original, integrated view of the concept of sustainable development. In addition, there is a strong call to retain focus towards concrete goals, while dramatically improving the way we measure progress against them [4]; a true 'revolution' within the development aid nexus.

We agree with subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatista movement, who succinctly observed that we are in a peculiar historical moment in which we, to explore the future, are forced to explore the past [6]. Thus, the paper asserts that time has come to dig into the archaeology of the key concepts explaining the history of development. Thereby, the paper attempts to offer a historical framework for the experience and describe how economic powers have guided the industry, and that the same logic is the key to understanding the destruction of cultures and social fabric that so often has accompanied development aid interventions. The paper presents a longitudinal, descriptive analysis which exposes the routine, mainstream frameworks within which the development industry operates. Refuting the mainstream explanations of the problems of contemporary shortcomings of development assistance and their possible resolution, it challenges the dominant, establishment ideas about the history, the progress, and the development of the sector itself.

2. The Early Years of Aid

Two billion people became *underdeveloped* on January 20, 1949, when President Truman coined the word as a diagnosis for a particular misery that affected most human beings and communities outside the US. He used a name that even non-americans would recognize as an undesirable condition [6].

Soon development theories and definitions proliferated, implying that, in exchange for the sacrifice of environments, solidarities, traditional interpretations, social experiments, and customs, the social majorities were offered a magical formula to escape from the condition of those-who-are-not-yet-but-will-be [6]. Since Truman, the blessing that development was supposed to bring to the world has been defined as closing the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries, for the latter to reach the "living standards" of the former (The Gap-Theory).

The dominant views between the late 1950's and the early 1970's fostered the expectation that capitalist economies could deliver growth, poverty alleviation and international convergence, by means of heavy state and World Bank and other international support interventions in the process of development [7]. Poverty was not a prime focus for the operations of international agencies. It was present in their aid agenda, but the reduction of poverty was a dimension of broader projects, such as industrialization, road building, and irrigation or electrification schemes. Likewise, according to the then accepted economic theories, inequality was rather viewed as beneficial (e.g., fostering investment) than detrimental to development [8].

The significance of this period was that working in a so-called developing country institution was an experience of collegiality on regular terms, not a special aid partnership [9].

External shocks affecting tropical commodities and oil in the late 1970's and mid-1980's forced many developing

country governments to borrow from the IMF and the World Bank for financial relief, at the price of policy reforms and complying with sets of conditionalities. The 1980's were thus a period of significant change of the conceptual framework and of policies towards developing countries. At the conceptual level, there was a reinforcement of the pre-eminence of the neoclassical theories that started in the 1950's. This provided the theoretical support of the stabilization programs. (IMF) and adjustment programs (World Bank) respectively. In the 1990's, these were widely criticized and they were eventually deemed to be failures. As a consequence, additional determinants of growth were put forward among aid agencies. The 'message' had become 'getting prices right'. Trade liberalization would be conducive to growth. The concept of poverty was now non-existent. First and foremost, this change embedded a particular assumption about how change can be effected – the idea that financial incentives will sway behavior [10]. This emphasis on fiscal measures pushed the economic expertise even more towards center-stage. Here, the dominant discussion about desirable development was clearly framed by a techno-economic paradigm, which marshalled technical expertise into center-stage, where it could team up with the economists. This development also affected the way that information was offered and the kind of information that was offered in attempts to influence the behavior of development actors.

In the 1980's, the so-called "lost decade for development", the real nature of the underdevelopment myth became evident. It finally became clear that underdevelopment is not a naturally occurring human condition, but a creation of the development enterprise itself. It is true that the development enterprise changed the face of the world, but in an opposite sense to what was promised. In 1960, the northern hemisphere countries were 20 times richer than those in the southern hemisphere; in 1980, 46 times. Far from closing, the gap widened [3].

At the root of this disparity lies the dogmatic power of the dominant scientific-industrial paradigm, where instrumental rationality and the cognitive framework of neo-classical economics dominates the validity and creation of new knowledge. As Harold Innes [11] observed: "The conditions of freedom of thought is in danger of being destroyed by science, technology, and the mechanization of knowledge…"

Howard [12] tends to agree, when he states that, in order to better understand the causes that lie behind the development debacle it is necessary to appreciate mainstream technocratic ideology as having the effect of "technocratizing" the notion of progress, simplifying and quantifying it in such a fashion that anyone, equipped with a handy and simple tool-kit, could pronounce judgement on the desirability of a course of action or a set of policies.

3. Emerging Insights

Richter [13] explains that there are strong and distinct values that accompany the ways in which systems are analyzed, how actors in the system are engaged in decisions about change and the ways in which change is enacted. Therefore, development practitioners need to open up fresh conversations about how human interaction can be more thoughtfully linked with social, economic and environmental challenges. It is a major problem that development actors find it so difficult to re-conceptualise their ideas and frameworks outside those drawn from the 'Global North''. Furthermore, it is embarrassing that many large international organizations are susceptible to foreign policy instrumentality that undermines their developmental and humanitarian impact.

The Brundtl and concept of sustainable development move beyond narrow indicators of economic efficiency and the like. Therefore, sustainability is a major testing ground for integrating science and technology with both humanities and social sciences [14], and there is a need for approaches that, belonging to no one discipline in particular, can allow a bridging of divides, and facilitate for different people to work together. Being focused on understanding complex and local realities, such approaches are ideal entry points for participatory approaches for inquiry and negotiated learning between local people and outsiders, between laymen and experts.

There is, indeed, a rich and important history that goes back 50 or more years where a cross-disciplinary livelihoods perspective profoundly influenced development thinking and practice. One early example is the work of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in what is today Zambia. This involved collaborations of ecologists, anthropologists, agriculturalists and economists looking at changing rural systems and their development challenges [15]. This work was truly integrative, locally-embedded, cross-sectoral and informed by a deep field engagement and a commitment to action.

Yet such perspectives did not survive the coming decades. As Western theories of modernization came to increase its influence in the development discourse, more mono-disciplinary perspectives came to rule the roost. Policy advice was increasingly influenced by economic scholars, rather than by the development generalists and field-based administrators of the past. With framing in terms of predictive models, of supply and demand, inputs and outputs, both micro and macroeconomics in different ways, offered a framing which was claimed to better suit the perceived needs of the time [16].

The 'community of practice' associated with sustainable livelihoods approaches in this period certainly had a strong normative commitment to poverty reduction and bottom-up, participatory approaches. The branded approaches began to be associated not just with analytical tools (frameworks and checklists), but with normative positions. The DfID guidance sheets [17] were quite explicit:

Firstly, the approach is 'people-centred', in that the making of policy is based on understanding the realities of the struggle of poor people themselves, on the principle of their participation in determining priorities for practical intervention, and on their need to influence the

institutional structures and processes that govern their lives. Secondly, it is 'holistic' in that it is 'non-sectoral' and it recognizes multiple influences, multiple actors, multiple strategies and multiple outcomes. Thirdly, it is 'dynamic' in that it attempts to understand change, complex cause-and-effect relationships and 'iterative chains of events'. Fourthly, it starts with analysis of strengths rather than of needs, and seeks to build on everyone's inherent potential. Fifthly, it attempts to 'bridge the gap' between macro- and micro-levels. Sixthly, it is committed explicitly to several different dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic, social and institutional.

A range of studies was produced in the late 1980's and during the 1990's about aid effectiveness including well-known studies by Cassen et al. [18], Mosley [19], Bauer [20], Berg [21] and Burnside and Dollar [22]. Although there was no firm verdict as to whether aid worked or not, there seemed to be a consensus that there was little solid knowledge about the impact of aid. The studies suggest that the erratic behavior of aid is a systemic property – a phenomenon that arises from the wider aid system and not from any individual component. Generally the conclusion was that the situation would be much improved if such knowledge was made available, and if aid agencies, and their counterparts on the receiving end, devoted more attention to the issue of learning [23].

What is clear, however, after 40 years of increasingly "professional" development cooperation by development agencies, is that many will agree with the then President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, when he said that "Development aid needs fixing" [24]. The admission that development has failed, by the criterion of alleviating poverty, is very humbling [9].

Corbridge [7] has a salient point when he claims that Post-Development thinkers like Gustavo Esteva force us to confront our own prejudices about the agendas of development and the shocking failures of some aspects of the mainstream approaches to the development project. They also provide a human touch that is too often missing in development studies, and bemoan the ways in which mainstream students set themselves up as technicians, or as detached observers of distant events. Corbridge finds it absurd to reduce development issues to positive social science which obsesses about means and only rarely considers the ends of 'development'.

Twenty-five years ago, Schneider [25] noted that development aid was still based on methods that have long been criticized for a near-systematic reliance on large industrial projects based on Western models that are totally alien to local needs and requirements, and tend to benefit only a small minority of a country's population. His observation still appears to be valid and one can observe that although the international donor community has pledged to make poverty history it has, seemingly, not been very successful in this endeavor. Among major problems are the systemic bias and

that the development industry has failed to realize (or internalize) the need for integrated and coordinated approaches. However, the most striking observation is the near universal failure to learn from experience. An explanation that lies close at hand is that if you don't acknowledge a problem, you can't address it.

Observations like these have generated a growing awareness of the need for system wide approaches to change, which has spawned a development of methodologies that can be applied equally well to organizations and stakeholders as well as to sectors, communities and societies. A key principle of these methodological processes is that they have participants collectively co-create the future, rather than having experts focusing on how to solve problems that are rooted in the past. In this kind of collective work, participants focus on system abilities, collective capabilities and individual competencies. Their main concern should be what is needed to support the system's (or organization's) abilities to endure and perform over the long term [13].

Lele [26] observed a dramatic transformation of ideas in the last few years of the 1980's. The question being asked in the environment-development debate was no longer "Do development and environmental concerns contradict each other?" but "How can sustainable development be achieved?" The idea of sustainable development had become pervasive. It seemed to have gained the kind of broad-based support that earlier development concepts lacked, and it looked poised to become the major developmental paradigm.

But murmurs of disenchantment were also being heard from people who found it difficult to work with issues that have not been nicely packaged, and linked to well-defined quantitative measures. Surfing on the maelstrom of "buzzwords" and "fuzzwords", that constantly flows within the development aid industry [27], these conservatives seem to have managed to defend the status quo by making sustainable development turn into a cliché -- a fashionable phrase that everyone pays homage to but nobody cares to define or even pay attention to.

Unsurprisingly, the outcomes of development aid interventions hardly seem to have improved over the past decades. An Oxford/Cornell workshop [28] found that in recent years, the debate on aid effectiveness has become increasingly polarized between the view that aid will never work and the view that we should give more aid (regardless of whether aid works or not). Both donors and recipient countries were found united in their frustration with the results of aid to Africa. It was argued that in making aid more effective we must deal with the problems on both the donor and recipient sides.

Moyo [29] argues that aid has not merely failed to work; it has compounded Africa's problems. Thus, she claims that developing countries in Africa would have been better off, had they received no development aid at all. Collier [30] thinks that the evidence that Moyo presents is sufficiently troubling and concludes that as the function of aid is not to make us feel better about ourselves but to promote development, we have better take heed when a well-informed African tells us that we are inadvertently having the opposite effect.

4. The Lack of Proper Leadership

As the world's leading development finance agency, the World Bank has, in principle, had an unrivaled opportunity to promote learning and knowledge sharing about development effectiveness. However, this turns out to have been a lost opportunity. There are severe problems with learning and knowledge sharing in the Bank, problems that have long been recognized, notably since the 1992 Wapenhans report [31]. "Something is not working because the problems we are encountering in today's projects are the same problems encountered in projects many years ago.… [We] keep making the same mistakes because we do not learn from earlier experience" [32]. Thus, the Bank's core business of lending has created a set of institutional incentives that have downplayed and undermined the learning that lending requires. Wapenhans [33] tries to explain/defend the resistance to learning and change within the Bank when he claims that if it appears that lessons of experience have not been learned, it is not because it has been inadequately recorded, nor because of irrationality or obduracy. Rather, even if incentives oftentimes may be weak, an array of divergent interests and powerful constellations of forces make things what they are; they act as formidable, at times immovable, obstacles to change.

In the 1990s, the then World Bank chief economist, Nick Stern, promoted the concept of 'empowerment' of the poor. However, this was progressively abandoned, as it rapidly appeared that the idea of empowerment implied power, and therefore would raise internal problems regarding the official mandate of the World Bank, i.e. to be primarily an apolitical body. The mandate requires the Bank to *ensure that any loan is used* with due attention to considerations of economy and efficiency and *without regard to political or other non-economic influences or considerations* (Art. III, Sect. 5b).

Thereby, the World Bank leadership effectively declared the Bank to be irrelevant in terms of sustainable development, as sustainable development is a highly political endeavor with its focus on egalitarian and democratic development.

From its creation, the World Bank has been the vanguard of the development aid industry. However, as the above indicates, it has shown itself to be an expensive failure, doing more to retard than to advance economic progress throughout the developing world as the bank has long promoted development at any cost, whether to human rights or to the environment [34]. Its projects and programs deliver far greater benefits to private corporations, contractors and consulting firms than to the poor [35]. It is noteworthy that there are many large scale projects in the World Bank portfolio that did not really rely on international aid as a primary funding source, such as international finance, was readily available.

Another World Bank contribution to the development aid debate is that, over the past decades, the governance issue has come to dominate the discussion due to Bank reports on the effectiveness of aid (in particular, Burnside and Dollar [22] and World Bank [36]), which suggested that aid is most efficient when provided to countries with "good governance".

However, the World Bank did only consider the governance of the recipient country and, as noted above, failed to put its own house in order - in making aid more effective we must deal with the problems on both the donor and recipient sides [28]. This point is made crystal clear by the numerous evaluations that have documented a continuous record of World Bank projects that failed to meet expectations, were not sustainable, and left borrowing nations with little more than increased debt. Given that record, it should not be surprising that bank-funded projects generally have failed in their essential purpose: promoting development. But the problem is not just that foreign assistance doesn't help. It almost certainly hurts. Today, Third World states are left with both huge debts and low growth. [37].

World Bank progress on knowledge and learning in support of improved development results remains elusive. The Bank is actually moving in the wrong direction – networks weaken and global knowledge exchanges suffer [38]. Senior leadership is lacking as it has not been a priority in recent years and, as result, a coherent strategic direction to guide staff knowledge and learning priorities and programs is missing. Knowledge and learning are not integrated into core business processes. A World Bank study [32] found that, given the risks that administrative and managerial mistakes entail, organizational leaders are unlikely to entertain new courses of action because of the potential for unanticipated mistakes associated with change. Unless they face a pressing need and/or a problem that cannot be solved through routine work, their natural tendency is to follow rules and regulations. By doing so, they can avoid making judgements and thus avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

Civil society actors have been pushing for greater accountability of the World Bank for at least three decades. It seems that they have been influential in pushing for greater accountability at the project and policy levels, but they have been much less successful in changing staff incentives for accountability to affected communities, or in improving board accountability through greater transparency in decision making, more representative vote allocation, or better parliamentary scrutiny. In other words, although civil society efforts have led to some gains in accountability with respect to Bank policies and projects, the deeper structural features of the institution — the incentives staff face and how the institution is governed— remain largely unchanged [39].

Suhrke [40] reports similar outcomes within UNHCR: lessons regarding technical aspects that had an obvious effectiveness rationale, and did not require major organizational adjustments, were adopted in the sense that new procedures were recognized as desirable and thus implemented. Lessons that would require structural change in the organization were recognized in principle but not implemented.

At present, the World Bank default assumption is that a sufficiently 'rigorous' empirical finding provides warrant for claims regarding the likelihood that the same project implemented elsewhere (or at a larger scale of operation) will attain correspondingly similar findings, but in recent years this

assumption has been increasingly (and properly) called into question. The implication should be clear [32]: "if the Bank is to become a bona fide 'learning organization,' it must of analytical necessity be able to articulate a credible basis on which the various 'lessons' emanating from its programs can and cannot be deployed elsewhere." According to the Bank, there's an Assistance Strategy for every poorer nation, designed after careful in-country investigation. But according to former insider Joseph Stiglitz, for each nation, the Bank hands the relevant ministers a 'restructuring agreement' pre-drafted for 'voluntary' signature. It always consists of the same four-step program. Step One is privatization, Stiglitz said, and rather than objecting to the sell-offs of state industries, some politicians - using the World Bank's demands to silence local critics - happily flog their electricity and water companies. After privatization, Step Two is capital market liberalization. In theory this allows investment capital to flow in and out. Unfortunately, as in Indonesia and Brazil, the money often simply flows out [41]

5. Attempted Remedies

A new conceptual framework progressively emerged at the end of the 20th century as development assistance goals were increasingly being conceived as things that can be, and must be, measured. The concept of development at the micro-level became, therefore, increasingly marginalized, due to the intrinsic difficulty of measuring it, and was replaced by that of 'growth' at the macro level. In terms of public action, this shift represents a narrowing of the agenda vis-à-vis the previous one of growth and development. It signals the acceptance that development is no longer a worthwhile goal of public policies, and that the previous policies elaborated over decades were *in fine* a failure [8].

The UN Millennium Declaration, that essentially was an effort to revive the messages from Rio, can be seen as a signum of the dissatisfaction with aid policies, as they had evolved until the year 2000. However, due to an obsession with measurement, it was condensed into the very operational and instrumental Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that lacked all of the soft goals, so characteristic of sustainable development.

Since 2000, when the Millennium Declaration was adopted, progress in human development has been uneven, leaving many behind and creating widening inequalities. Rodrik [42] points to some other problematic issues: The Millennium Declaration was meant to be a compact between the world's rich and poor countries, however, the MDGs contain no numerical target for financial aid or any other aspect of rich countries' assistance, in contrast to the highly specific poverty-related targets set for developing countries. Advanced countries evidently managed to resist any new commitments.

The first report prepared by the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda [43] clearly states that business as usual cannot be an option and transformative change is needed, and as the challenges ahead are highly interdependent, a new, more holistic approach is needed to address them. The ultimate aim is to create a vision for the future that rests on the core values of human rights, equality and sustainability. The persistent inequalities that hold back human development and efforts to achieve sustainable development need to be overcome.

Obviously, the Post-2015 Agenda needs to avoid the MDG trap of focusing on aggregates and national averages, in order to meet the central imperative of 'leaving no one behind' and challenging inequalities and discrimination. It, thus, needs to reflect the integrated view of the concept of a sustainable development and set an agenda that better reflects a commitment and willingness befitting the global challenge of sustainable development [5].

Unfortunately, however, all the member countries participating in the United Nations Rio+20 summit in Brazil in 2012 [44] agreed to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will build upon the MDGs and converge with the Post 2015 Development Agenda. The proposal of SDGs contains 17 goals with 169 (supposedly measurable) targets covering a broad range of sustainable development issues. This way, the SDGs are most likely to water down the Post-2015 Development Agenda in the same way as the MDGs watered down the Millennium Declaration.

6. The Institutional Complacency

Paraphrasing Ana Palacio [45] one may argue that among major issues concerning the development industry, one is consistently overlooked: its addiction to meaningless rhetoric. Nearly 70 years ago, George Orwell examined the tendency toward ambiguity, and he offered the rather simple explanation that "leadership speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible." In other words, hazy language is deemed necessary to obscure unflattering realities. To some extent, Orwell's observation certainly rings true. Today, there is also a somewhat different issue: vague rhetoric is still used because policies are fundamentally indefensible but, now, it is also used because the development industry is, to some extent, shying away from the risk of having to defend any position at all.

Therefore, this paper stresses the importance of a breakout from the prevailing ruts and traps of normal 'professionalism' and the quest for 'status quo' within the development industry. (Ruts are the brain's way of staying lazy, and the brain is very clever at dodging risks and coming up with convincing excuses about why something should be avoided. Avoidance is the brain's way of protecting from risk and potential failure [46]. But avoidance itself really is a form of failure.)

By not acting and striving for possibilities, or taking a chance, agents are destined to repeat the same old patterns and they won't achieve any meaningful changes. The learning blocks may also be caused by bureaucratic inertia, which creates forces to resist a proposed innovation. Such resistance is often rationalized by means of an official myth, which is supposed to explain why changes would be impossible or undesirable. Exploding these myths is a key precondition for

change and organizational learning [47].

An important reason for the recurrent failures in development efforts is that actors in development projects have pre-conceived narratives regarding development processes, narratives that tend to prevail even in the face of research demonstrating their falsehood [48]. This is partly due to the problem that, at the heart of many development programs, there is a fundamentally flawed logic that confuses ends with means and processes with outcomes. This seriously compromises the ability to learn useful lessons and apply them to future program development. Instead, as in any approach based on faith rather than evidence, the advocates—convinced that they already know all the answers—merely urge more dedication to the ''right'' steps.

An example of what may go on in development agencies is provided by Ostrom et al. [49] who, in a study of Swedish Sida, found that most discussions on sustainability appear to be associated with the screening of projects. Only one department mentioned sustainability being discussed in relationship to evaluations. No department reported any efforts to learn about sustainability from ongoing projects. The authors suggest that, most likely, the same conditions prevail in most of the major donor organizations. Consequently, they claim that unless there is a drastic change of attitudes, development assistance will continue as usual, despite its problems. The reason is that, currently, its funding does not depend on the sustainability of its interventions as there are no institutions or other watchdogs to ensure an efficient delivery of aid that is promoting sustainable development. Thus, a change in the culture within development aid organizations and among those who hold them to account is urgently needed.

7. Additional Stumbling Blocks

The development industry tends to sound all the right notes and proclaims itself to be ambitious about changing the way it does its work. It claims to have a deeply felt desire to avoid repeating the mistakes of an earlier generation of development professionals. Still, it has been unable or unwilling to implement much in this respect. Most activities still follow the conventional project management philosophy. This is based on the logic of material goods production – to produce a certain good in a given time with a given budget and with predefined inputs and activities. This 'logframe logic' seems hard to abandon as it fits so well with the current planning models and control needs of donor and partner country bureaucracies. However with this attitude, agents simply overlook the essential interactions among system components. The consequences are grave – concepts and strategies about what must be done become more and more sophisticated and refined, while agents stay behind, unable to translate such concepts into the how of practical interventions.

Beck [50] claims that the old structures of government and science are characterized by linear thinking. This prevents these institutions, in as well donor as recipient countries, from keeping up with an evolving society and acquiring knowledge about its fundamental basic structure and the dynamics of emerging problem areas. Each discipline develops its own reduced "story", a story that shrivels the rich complexity of reality to fit the discipline's particular strengths and ignore, or deflect our attention from, its weaknesses.

This means that the more a society develops according to the prevailing industrial and scientific knowledge, the more unanticipated and unwanted effects will appear. It is this multitude of often poorly understood feedbacks, and significant time lags that results in a system that is certain to produce unexpected results. Especially indirect feedbacks among different components have a tendency to offset or exacerbate an emerging problem.

Therefore, anyone wanting to understand what is going on must open up for knowledge produced outside of the established institutions and, thereby, override the expert dogma that only experts are able to spot upcoming threats. A purely professional solution is no solution at all in these environments.

Documents produced by planning processes are, of course, only theories about what people think might happen. But they often become reality – the 'map' becomes the 'world' and often transforms into a rigidly followed contract that requires proof of deliverables as the heart of development effectiveness. This perspective is motivated by a logic that views development as 'projectable change' [51]. And yet, every day, the world surprises us with its unexpected twists of events, which arise out of multiple variables and strands of efforts. Hence, the need to keep an eye on the context and 'learn one's way towards a solution'. Viewing development as an adaptive management process is often agreed as important, at least informally, but there is a fundamental disconnect between the rhetoric about the need for learning in development and the reality of procedures that agencies require.

Development actually implies learning. Thus, unless there is learning, there is no development. This point is even more salient when it comes to sustainable development, which is, in effect, a kind of travel into unchartered territory. As Lansu [52] puts it "Learning for sustainable development - is learning to come to grips with a fast changing domain in which knowledge is essential." ...All living systems develop, and all development is learning. Therefore a sustainable community is always a learning community; a community that continually changes, develops, and learns. Thus, knowledge generation and knowledge sharing become issues of primary importance, and there is an urgent need to discuss what this means for professionals in development assistance.

8. Some Key Issues

This paper insists that development aid should promote the forthcoming Post-2015 Development Agenda. Therefore Agenda 21 is an important point of departure that points at two issues of special interest; firstly an autonomous technology oriented development which is getting out of hand, and secondly the absence of equity considerations in development planning. The first issue relates to the current paradigm

guiding scientific thinking and professional standards as well as to the inability of our compartmental institutional and administrative systems to cope with a development characterized by increasing complexity and uncertainty.

The second issue deals both with the role that economics has been given in the evaluation of development options, and with the working of certain systems which aim at a combination of a political machine with big financial or industrial interests for the purpose of corruptly influencing the government. As perspectives are important for integrating insights and interventions beyond disciplinary or sectoral boundaries, some of the limitations, dangers and challenges need to be seriously discussed. In particular, the problems arising from the simplistic application of the frameworks that have come to dominate the development discussion and practice over the past decades. One such problem is that, according to the current culture within the development industry, showing success using 'hard data' – of millions fed or schooled or housed or organized better – has an impact. Telling a more nuanced story about social change, involving contextual difficulties, messy partnerships and intangible but essential outcomes gets one nowhere [53].

There is, thus, a need to enhance the capacity to address key lacunae in recent discussions, including questions of knowledge, dominant actors, scale and dynamics. We need a more serious and deeper discussion of the essential differences between current realities, such as arrays of divergent interests and powerful constellations of forces that make things what they are, and current management approaches and how those differ from what is required for successful development assistance. Such reflections could, and should, result in the grave observation that there is an urgent need for changes of current approaches to delivery of development assistance. We badly need a range of different, predominantly mental, changes that could help open our eyes and make management approaches more compatible with the types of interventions needed to promote sustainable development. It becomes a major issue to develop innovative partnerships with local and third party organizations that can provide grounded experience and expertise.

A mindset of flexibility and inquiry is crucial for the pursuit of sustainable development, and creative collaboration is essential for moving teams forward. However, as indicated above, going beyond tradition is rarely popular with the industry peers. It takes social courage and a willingness to question what historically has been taught as unchallengeable fact. For example, prevailing accountability systems tend to reward those with timid goals and punish those with ambitious goals. They reward those who make precise specifications of what will happen, and therefore reward those whose guesses will inevitably be shown to be wrong as 'life happens'. In so doing, they reward those who do not learn and adapt what they are doing – and punish those who do [53]. Unfortunately, this simply strengthens the prevailing views and trends. It also tends to appeal to the "herd instinct," the Status Quo, and to those who feel they need to fit in with the latest trend, fashion and widget of the industry. Those who do not "fit in" tend to

be viewed as "outsiders" and are prone to being labeled as outcast or untouchables. Thus, the most important issue for the development nexus is to appreciate that, as Jiddu Krishnamurti puts it: "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society" (from Wikipedia entry The Outsider [Colin Wilson]).

9. Moving Forward

People with different perspectives will define system boundaries in different ways. Considering the poor achievements we have seen this far in terms of promotion of sustainable development it is, therefore, essential that the conversation on sustainability or "where should we go next" be dominated by individuals who have their emotional equity invested in the future rather than in the past. It needs to be led by individuals who do not feel the need to defend decisions that were taken in the past [54].

As indicated earlier, the MDG experience has made it quite clear that people-oriented development cannot be achieved without getting to know the people that are supposed to benefit from planned development interventions. For sure, public participation has been one of the major buzzwords within the development aid industry. However, as with sustainable development, the industry has managed to interpret this concept at will. The result has been devastating, for example indicated in the book "Participation – the new tyranny?" [55].

Douglas, [56] noted that for complex issues, such as development planning, the most successful policies tend to combine expert analysis and design with deliberation and partnership between many players, along with markets and other arrangements that tap into individual motivations. However, Douglas' biggest insight is, perhaps, a warning against depending too much on rational argument. How we see the world depends as much on where we sit as on what we think, and human beings can often be understood better through their rituals and behaviors than through their doctrines and their beliefs. Thus, she rejects the idea that, someday, the different parts of science will fit together and allow some bright scientists to deduce from first principles everything we need to know. Essentially, her message is that it is better to be approximately right than to be precisely wrong.

Sustainable development is about moving towards the meeting of multiple goals and fashioning the mix that is most appropriate to each locality. Therefore, the current obsession with measurements must go away and the development industry must develop an understanding that sustainable development requires intense face-to-face contacts rather than access to an electronic knowledge bank, as touted by the World Bank. This requires forums and decision-making structures in each locality, arenas where the decisions taken have citizen support. Such accountable, effective, and inclusive local government structures are both a means for development and a critical end-goal of development. Experience shows that the creation of a vision or idealized future for a public or private system often brings some interesting results; it can lead those involved in it to become

conscious of self-imposed constraints and hence makes it easier to remove them. It also forces examination of externally imposed constraints that are usually passively accepted. Ways of removing or "getting around" them are then explored, often with success, it can also reveal that system designs and plans that seem not to be feasible when considered separately, are either feasible, or nearly so, when considered as a whole [57].

This implies that communities must participate as equal partners from the very beginning. Such development of lasting partnerships must be allowed to take time because the stakeholders need to get to know and trust each other, and learn how to work together. In this process, it is important to appreciate that community management goes beyond simple participation. It aims to empower and equip communities to own and control their own systems, creating a transformative movement. Therefore, such processes must build on interpersonal or inter-organizational relations in which actors with varying degrees of mutual dependency undertake transactions and activities that dovetail with each other and contribute to a joint, predefined purpose. Systemic interventions of this kind demand intensive face-to-face interactions between those participating in the interventions. In other words, systemic interventions that target complex social systems will require interaction with high intensiveness. The role of the planning function changes. The primary function now becomes to initiate processes of interaction and learning that lead to a common perception and a shared consensus of goals, objectives and activities.

To this end, planning and implementation need to be iterative, with short planning horizons, so as to ensure that common perspectives and consensus are maintained. Also, the time frame for project realization becomes highly unpredictable. The time needed for change processes that involve people's behavior is difficult to predict and often reaches well beyond the usual three-to-five-year periods of development projects [58]. Still, agencies have failed to take local specificity and unique complexity into accout. Most activities have been built on following a single, or recognizable Western template.

Finally, to progress, we have to abandon the habit of reducing the poor to cartoon characters that fit the set of clichés and stereotypes that has been with us for as long as there has been poverty [59] and, instead, take the time to really understand their lives and their thinking, in all their complexity and richness. You have to start with observations because that is the only way to illuminate how people actually get things done, or don't get things done. So, if you want to get involved in participatory activities with poor slum dwellers, you really have to understand what is going on in their environment.

In addition, evidence suggests that a diverse community is a resilient community, capable of adapting to changing situations. Accordingly, it is argued that sustainable development requires conscious efforts to include representatives from different interest groups, contradictory tendencies, different cultural backgrounds, etc., in the process of reflection and decision-making. The consultations

during the preparations for the post-2015 agenda revealed a huge appetite and demand for engagement, not only in the design of the development agenda but also in its future implementation. People asked for transformation — not just of the 'what' but also of the 'how' development is done. They asked not just for a one-off consultation but for an ongoing conversation [4].

Thus, to be relevant, development aid thinking needs to share some important characteristics with 'post-normal science' [60]: it needs to break free of (1) reductionist and mechanistic assumptions about the way things are related and systems operate, (2) normative social values uninformed by stakeholders and community inputs, and (3) the expectation that science delivers final, precise estimates with certainty.

10. The Future of Development Aid

The way forward is, thus, not one laden with delivered cargo or services or money but with the willingness to slow down, to put in the time and resources to study the context thoroughly, to learn as one goes, to link learning to actual problems, to be relational, above all to use a more light-handed "wise support" approach. Within the development industry it is mostly overlooked that conditions will differ, and that the need to work from them is paramount. Such basic management skills must be developed to meet equally straightforward and basic weaknesses in organizational structure. Although these basics are neither fancy nor fashionable, they are the forgotten backbone of development assistance. The practice that formal evaluations seldom contribute to new knowledge that can benefit the prospects for sustainability should become history, and evaluations must no longer have their main focus on accountability and timelines, while neglecting to include significant impacts for stakeholders.

There is reason to reiterate what Hirshleifer [61] expressed: "Certainly, managers should not go on committing the same errors, having been deluged by a river of advice. But decision-makers are just people, and people make mistakes. Therefore, it should be a high priority issue to devise institutions whereby fallible and imperfect administrators may be forced to learn from error."

Reflective practice is helpful in this respect. It means the stepping back from an experience to make sense of it, understand what it means, learn from it and apply that learning to future situations. Applying critical thinking to experience develops and deepens insights. But what makes reflective practice different from other approaches to learning is the focus on action. Reflective practice occurs when a practitioner initiates a cycle of action learning. The key to reflective practice is combining genuine inquisitiveness with a commitment to do things differently based on careful consideration of alternatives. Therefore, development organizations have a crucial role to play in encouraging and supporting reflective practice by creating a culture that supports critical self-reflection and self-evaluation' [62].

11. Conclusions

Originally, the principles of Sustainable Development were based on an idea that new, different priorities would form a richer base of values and promote a future development of the human species within an ethical framework based upon values such as equity, inclusivity, diversity, and integration. However, this was not what the idea came to mean within mainstream thinking. Therefore, the most important task right now is to make the utmost efforts to help the Post-2015 Development Agenda restore the original meaning of the idea of sustainable development, and to define a framework serving to guide the development establishment in an effort to promote this renewed agenda.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. (Confucius; quoted in [63]).

Experience has, no doubt been bitter, but seems to have produced very little learning. Imitation has not been very successful either, as there have been no reflections on what fits where, and why. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a re-alignment of the development aid industry to make it fit to learn and come to grips with its utterly dismal track record. The industry should strive for goals such as poverty alleviation, equitable development, and human dignity, rather than being guided by a severely misled notion of sustainable development and even of development itself. It definitely needs a better vanguard than the World Bank, which has promoted and defended the neo-liberal economic framework and the day-to-day slogging it out of development practice, which clearly has thwarted most efforts to follow any reasonable model for effective development assistance.

As noted before, it is no sign of health to be well adjusted to a fundamentally sick system. Thus, the most important challenge, if we want a healthy development assistance system, is to ensure a fundamental change of culture, within development aid institutions, and among those who hold them to account. Such a change will require the establishment of an institution, or watchdog, able to neutralize the powerful array of divergent interests and powerful constellation of forces that, currently, make things what they are and act as formidable, at times immovable, obstacles to change [33].

In addition, the all too frequent, negative social and environmental consequences of mainstream approaches to development assistance, based on economic growth and liberalization, strongly stress the urgency to develop foundations of a new conceptual framework for development aid approaches that not only reduce the scope for negative social and environmental conditions, but also promote social and cultural relations that can be considered democratic and empowering. Reading today about the achievements of the sustainable livelihoods approaches of the early 1970's one cannot avoid a feeling of sadness for a path not taken.

Planners must stop hailing lofty theories and concepts and, instead, pay due attention to 'ground truth'. The primary task now becomes to initiate processes of interaction and learning that lead to a common perception and a shared consensus on goals, objectives and activities. To this end, complacency and herd-instinct must be weeded out of the development aid industry, and we must all abandon the habit of reducing the poor to cartoon characters that fit the set of clichés and stereotypes that has been with us for as long as there has been poverty and, instead, take the time to really understand their lives and their thinking. Grounded observations provide the only way to illuminate how people actually get things done, or don't get things done.

Although such basics are neither fancy nor fashionable, they are the forgotten backbone of development assistance. The future of development is very much depending on institutional and personal willingness to put in the time and resources needed to study the context thoroughly, to learn as one goes, to link learning to actual problems, to be relational, above all to use a more light-handed "wise support" approach.

The development industry is far too well adjusted to a profoundly sick development paradigm. A breakaway from this paradigm is a basic requirement for the industry to be able to support sustainable development. We, thus, need to see more courageous behavior within the industry. Meaningful policy changes will, obviously, upset a number of individuals, as they require a reconfiguration of social and political forces, coalitions, and alliances to shape governance arrangements that enable effective participation of intended beneficiaries and their advocates. *All* development involves values and leads to changes. Therefore, it is essential, also, to carefully consider to what extent one shares the values promoted by the World Bank which, undoubtedly, has dominated mainstream thinking on development and development assistance for the past 50+ years.

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