

QUESTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

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Development work seems to be a fashionable issue. It generally refers to the efforts of professionals born in peaceful “western” countries to assist people from other territories where conditions are less favorable and violent, and intergroup conflict is more prevalent. But there is still some uncertainty when defining the term, or explaining the basic guidelines and procedures of this work. The people who work in Development (we, the overseas staff) often have to give a lot of details on what it is exactly we do, and justify the reasons why we are in this specific field. We are often accused, more than in any other field, of being driven too much by political ideology (generally associated with the hard left), utopian ideas or unrealistic “peace missions”. Conversely, Development workers and volunteers are considered by some to be modern missionaries or diplomats of “good”.

Citizens of peaceful societies sometimes ask Development staff a variety of basic questions: What do Development workers do? Is Human Rights work similar to Development? How can we help to improve the lives of people from countries different from our own? Is it possible to confront difficult political and economic situations? Is Development pacifist by nature? How can I become an overseas worker? What is the relationship between Development and volunteer work? How can a doctor, sociologist or psychologist working overseas handle the political aspects of his or her surroundings? Is the work always carried out in disadvantaged countries? Does working in Development allow for a personal life? Has there been any academic research usefully applied to Development work? Is the current research being used adequately? Do diplomats work in Development? Do overseas workers do diplomacy work? Can Development improve the current international situation? Is there a real value in Development work?

It is also valuable to consider the internal questioning and self-criticism that individuals in Development work express: What are the similarities and differences between Development and Humanitarian Aid? What is more effective and more legitimate: working for large institutions (UN, OSCE, etc.) or working for smaller entities? Are NGOs really efficient? What is the relationship between NGOs and governments? Who do NGOs represent? Who chooses them? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Do overseas workers and volunteers help or hinder progress? Do the societies or communities in conflict really have solutions to the problems? Can disadvantaged communities who suffer from violence be “cured”? Should the action in the community be decided by the overseas workers or by the community itself? How

do we deal with the differences between community processes and individual processes? Do the objectives of Development change according to the donors? Is it possible to work effectively in scenarios and communities that are so different from our own? Is it possible to be impartial after listening to all the sides involved in the conflict? Is it possible to work with all sides? How can we work with perpetrators? How can the work best be coordinated between the headquarters and the field? Which strategies for social change work better: bottom-up or top-down? How can we bridge together the different areas of Development: linking theory and practice, working with individuals and communities, considering material needs and emotional needs? Are there priority countries, areas or groups? Who is a more appropriate worker, a generalist worker or a specialist worker? Do organizations of senior overseas workers or intellectuals contribute to the improvement of the present Development work? What is the most appropriate relationship between the Development staff and the community in which they work? What is the best form of relationship and commitment to that area? How are overseas workers affected by the atrocities and situations they find themselves in? Can working in Development provoke arrogant or "self centered" attitudes? Are we able to work with the damage caused by violence in others without confronting the violence we have inside ourselves? How can some apparently paradoxical situations be explained (for example that violence encourages solidarity or relations between certain groups)? Are the victims we work with manipulated or used for political reasons? How do governments from both sides - receiver and donor- cope with situations of violence and inequality?

It seems that Development workers, more than any other professionals, constantly need to justify their work. Overseas staff tries to make people understand the profession, describing what they do and explaining the needs underlining this type of work. If they feel they should promote their work it is partly because this field has not yet been professionally recognized in all the peaceful societies, and partly because there are still no answers to some of the questions asked. Perhaps this is because, given the short tradition of this work, we haven't yet been able to ask the right questions. As in other professions focused on people and their lives, it is critical to maintain the uncertainty: there are no right answers to many of the questions emerging. That does not mean we can avoid the search for the right questions and answers. There are fundamental concerns, which are shared by volunteers, experienced development workers and the local people from the communities we work with. These fundamental questions are somehow a reflection of difficulties in this type of work. As a job challenged by everyday reality, there is no single discipline that explains the complexity of different situations, and in this sense Development tries to take different needs into account, considering various levels of intervention.

Few statements are widely accepted in the field of Humanitarian Aid or Development. One of the most obvious is that the professionals' energy and dedication are essential. Some

may call it commitment, implying the religious or ideological motivation behind it. Whatever it may be, this motivation must always respect the group it is aimed at. There is one common characteristic which differentiates these disadvantaged groups from Western overseas workers: they have had less (or no) opportunities in life, and this makes their daily tasks and survival more difficult than ours. These are the “differences in life options” (Mary Kaldor, *“The new wars”*). Despite our seeming position of power, development workers should not place a value judgment on locals. It’s not that we are better than they are, just that we’ve had more choices. Volunteers and Development workers generally have more control over their lives, but that doesn’t mean that they should be the examples for the people and communities they work with.

A second undeniable fact in the field of Development is the need for training and information regarding the local communities. Respect is knowledge, and knowledge understands. Overseas workers should always aim to have the maximum amount of information and be prepared for different styles of communication (social, political, academic, journalistic, etc.). They have to be able to listen at different levels (ranging from a specific person asking for help, to a politician). They have to understand what has been made explicit and what has been omitted, interpret silences and promises and avoid manipulation.

At the level of the political and economic situations which shape our world, we are faced with issues of the unequal distribution of wealth and power that mark enormous differences between groups. This is obvious, even though its proclamation is sometimes demagogically associated with a specific political orientation. The same mistake is made with other public statements. For example if we emphasize the benefits of the secure environment offered by the family or close friends, some might attribute it to “conservative” ideologies. There is an undeniable and urgent need for justice and human rights for all generations. Some political parties and politicians manipulate these ideas by relating basic needs with political ideologies and not giving enough support to the effective help pursued by Development work.

What are the effective tasks of Development work? Tasks that benefit the affected populations and that provide them with more control over their environment. Who defines a real benefit: the donors, the foreign workers, or the affected populations? If we focus our attention on recent times, specifically on public financing provided by national public agencies, we find some “shady” example: In one case, the national-foreign financing agency decides to support an NGO (which is also national-foreign and does not include locals in its staff) whose objective is to support local minority groups in the Middle East working for the “conversion” of Muslim attitudes and ways of life to Christian ones. The public justification is that this NGO is helping minority groups in the local area: the pro-Christians who find themselves in a largely Muslim population. However previous studies on the economic, religious and political situation show there is some relevant social knowledge missing: an analysis on the global repercussions of reinforcing or providing more resources to a specific minority. Reliable analysis carried out

by independent professionals indicates that these types of actions can provoke a polarization of society and an increase of hostility or violence in the area, thus weakening the local social fabric. The following are some relevant questions to ask in future evaluation of the situation: What were the main local or national interests when designing the intervention? Have some of the local interests been overlooked? What criteria (religious, political or economic) has the national agency used? How can this NGO and others truly contribute to the development of a *free social ordering* (V. Pérez Díaz, “Civil or uncivil Associations”)? Who evaluates the objectives of the project and the real extent of its results? Is there an international entity which can guarantee that national governments are not going to overly politicize the Development agencies? How can the workers face the possible negative consequences of their projects?

The present need for Development work in vast areas of the world is most of the times related to poverty that originates from inequality, not shortage (see J.Ziegler, “Famine in the world as explained to my son”). In this way, poverty, deterioration of the environment and unemployment are becoming more and more rooted, widespread and handled by the already empowered, due to corruption and the inefficiency of the economic and political institutions. Causes and consequences intermingle, showing the violence generated by “the rage of the poor”, the waste and injustice and the arrogant ignorance of the “consolidated democracies” (S. George, “Lugano Report”). There are more and more cases of refugee groups and displaced people. Their problems have to be tackled by renovating previous national and international regulations which no longer respond adequately to these current situations.

The close future is based on what already exists and what there is to come: networks of citizens looking for social justice, the knowledge and awareness of situations that go beyond our immediate daily context, education, the fight against impunity, the need to question a democracy that we have accepted (full of guilty silences with regard to atrocities of the past and accepting the exploitation and power of companies and transnational entities) and the need to formulate more inclusive social regulations. It would be reasonable to consider examples such as Porto Alegre and its focus on the empowerment of the locals making responsible decisions regarding their city, a positive proposal which goes beyond reforms. We Development workers want to believe that another world is possible. Some things can be changed by accepting that political and economic interests exist but firmly opposing them with Development work. Perhaps this can be achieved combining well-informed and communicative attitudes (“Creating paths instead of covering holes” J.M. Mendiluce). And this can be based on mutual generosity and the authentic urge to share (avoiding a charitable or folkloric -superficial multicultural approach- attitude).

On a daily basis, internationals working in Development look for maximum support from the local people with the absolute conviction that only the local population can build their own better future. To sincerely empower locals constant discussions and exchanges of

information with the beneficiaries are needed. But attention must also be given to issues of gender, the future for new generations, solid ethics and improved communication between entities and institutions regulating social life. To concentrate our efforts and to continue working in Development, I wish the same for all of us: to be fully aware of the difficulties and resistances to our work, to be able to confront the monolithic tendencies and to exclude the larger political and economic interests. It is very important to carry out our daily work against a wide political and historical background, placing emphasis on the struggle against inequality, and the constant search for mechanisms that guarantee justice and the creation of opportunities, enhancing the dignity in the lives of the communities and the population we work with. This can only be achieved through constant exchange between the communities we work with, experienced Development workers, volunteers, different types of organizations and local, national and international social networks. Living with the knowledge that many times we cannot be neutral, and the realization that we will be blamed for being politically biased. Despite the tension and contradictions of the daily work of Development, it is just like working in any other adult chosen job you really believe in.

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