

## Organic Development

“The ‘development debate’ is re-forming around a conflict between privileging the global market and privileging human communities: Do we continue expanding industry and wealth indefinitely, or do we find a way that human communities (however defined) can recover social intimacy, spiritual coherence, healthy environments, and sustainable material practices?”<sup>1</sup>

It is evident to many that there are serious problems with today’s development models. Those that worked well enough in the past no longer seem to elicit positive results.

It is plausible that the present models have evolved from those that were successful in the past, but these were applied to countries that had been developed more or less along Western industrialized lines and which had experienced a retraction (e.g., Europe and Japan after WWII) or to those which proactively sought the Western model (e.g., South Korea and Taiwan). There is a shrinking number of such countries extant today.

Unless the residents of some countries are inherently inferior to those of others—difficult to believe given the vagaries of human genetics and the often artificial nature of national borders—there must be valid reasons, worth examination, why so many countries (pejoratively called “Least [or ‘Less’] Developed Countries” or LDCs) have not developed following the Western model. Given that everyone wants to be rid of the diseases, short life span, political instability, and other banes of poverty, consideration must be given to additional forms of development that are more amenable to the cultures and sensibilities of these countries as they have evolved over epochs, generations, previous interaction with rich countries, and the recent period of modern development practices.

Attainment of the excessively expensive and environmentally unsustainable developed country model is not possible for all—imagine the extrapolation of their per capita energy habits, carbon emissions, pollution rates, and fresh water use to the whole world. It is evident that a different goal for equitable and sustainable development needs to be set that places a premium on growth consistent with the preservation of global natural resources and results in a smaller disparity in the quantity of assets held by the top and bottom segments of the population. For this to happen will require a change in mind-set on the part of a large fraction of the world’s societies and will take a generation or more to implement once decided upon. This change can come about only through inclusive consultation by the bulk of the world’s nations followed by the implementation of mutually-accepted rules governing transnational issues, such as resources, pollution, war and the like.

Until some nations take steps toward these measures, equitable development among nations, despite best intentions, will be impossible. Interim approaches should nevertheless be explored to diminish the present great disparities of wealth and opportunity, which are a major cause of the strife currently destabilizing rich and poor nations alike. This article explores a promising model that seeks to increase a group's ability to adapt to new opportunities and enhance their resilience to shocks, while providing the tools to animate the process. It closes with an example of such a program in Haiti.

## **Adaptive Capacity**

Experience with human nature indicates that severe pressures would be required to force nations to cooperate to the extent that those which are the most wealthy and powerful will voluntarily forego more of their advantages in order to encourage the poorest and weakest to thrive. Yet, difficult as overcoming the advantages held by the rich world due to its huge investments in the status quo may be, nature appears to have built cracks in all systems, called adaptive cycles, which present occasional opportunities for renewal.

Almost all systems—financial, ecological, social, etc.—are dynamic; they cycle through periods of growth, conservation, destruction and reorganization. The first two phases tend to be incremental and of long duration, while the latter two often comprise rapid change and renewal. Simply put, as a societal system begins and grows over a long period, competitive forces favor certain dominances that eventually appear unassailable. Diversity exists, however, in pockets throughout the system and finds opportunities to grow and spread using the “capital” made available by the dominant forces. During times of perturbation (financial crises come to mind) novel recombinations can appear from these pockets of diversity that can transform the main system. The accumulated capital of the dominant system, however, usually attenuates the change, adapting and incorporating it without the destruction of the entire system. In most cases, this is a healthy process that equally allows forests to adapt after a fire, countries to reorganize after the fall of dictatorships, and financial systems to reorganize after market bubbles burst, all without catastrophic repercussions. This process is called the system's adaptive capacity. These adaptive cycles can occur throughout the system in a nested manner, effecting renewals at greater and lesser levels.

A nation state is a social system that also possesses elements that allow for self maintenance, such as its culture, institutions, and other networks which together provide some of the rules that have evolved from accumulated knowledge and experience. Apart from making the resulting society unique, these rules create a buffer that resists control of the system by interest groups and gives the system flexibility in problem solving.

States with a high adaptive capacity can often take advantage of the new opportunities offered by disruptions to reorganize with little damage to crucial services. States with a low adaptive capacity have fewer options during periods of reorganization, often cannot

do what is needed to react in ways that are to its advantage, and end up emerging from the disturbance having, in effect picked up fewer useful self-development skills from the experience than they could have.

The key to enhancing adaptive capacity is resilience, which seems to require the interaction of four critical factors:

- learning to exploit change and uncertainty;
- nurturing diversity for resilience;
- combining different types of knowledge for learning; and
- ability to adapt towards a condition that provides social stability

## **Adaptive Co-Management**

Current development programs addressing important issues such as education, health, and the environment, even those that are well financed and maintained for a long period, often fail. Typically, initial successes are followed by failure, due to institutional rigidity, rent seeking, and a loss of trust in the program by stakeholders. The reasons can be boiled down to a political inability or unwillingness to deal with the needs and desires of the people<sup>2</sup>. Contributing to this is the narrow view of the problem usually taken by the donor—examining and addressing one or several problems without taking the whole system into account—and the different points of view taken by a group of donors, all dividing the problem into sectors they feel they can manage to “fix”. The standard reaction to this well-recognized problem is “donor coordination,” which has a poor success record, as each donor believes it has valid reasons for its choices.

Referring to ecological interventions, Bunnell (2002) writes, “Compromises among those viewpoints can be arrived at through a political process. However, mediation among stakeholders is irrelevant if it is based on ignorance of the integrated character of nature and people. The results may be momentarily satisfying to the participants, but ultimately reveal themselves as based upon unrealistic expectations about the behavior of natural systems and the behavior of people. As investments fail, the policies of government, private foundations, international agencies and non-governmental organizations flop from emphasizing one kind of partial solution to another. Over the last three decades, such policies have flopped from large investment schemes, to narrow conservation ones to equally narrow community development ones.”

He continues, “Each approach is built upon a particular world-view or theoretical abstraction. The conservationists depend on concepts rooted in ecology and evolution, the developers on variants of free market models, the community activists on precepts of community and social organization. All these views are correct in the sense of being partially tested and credible representations of one part of reality. The problem is that they are partial. They are too simple and lack an integrative framework that bridges disciplines and scales.”

What is needed, according to these authors, is an approach that combines iterative learning with a collaborative management in which rights and responsibilities are jointly shared, which will encourage learning, linkages among systems, and the inclusion of ever-increasing system complexities in the process of development.

This adaptive co-management includes key features such as:

- a focus on learning-by-doing
- synthesis of different knowledge systems
- collaboration and power-sharing among community, regional and national levels
- management flexibility.

These can facilitate an approach to governance that encourages dialogue among all concerned and the development of both institutions and the institutional means to stimulate this constant, iterative learning to tackle ever more complex societal systems holistically.

Development alternatives, when offered in a very poor society, are often viewed with some mistrust. One reason for this is that there is by definition an element of the unknown in innovation. Poor societies can seldom afford the potential loss associated with adapting to the new, even if the potential benefits are high and well understood<sup>3</sup>. The ability to absorb shocks—negative and even potentially positive—and to start up again is called coping ability or resilience. As an example, a well-financed technology company would have an R&D department that produces new and improved products, calculating that their total benefits outweigh their costs. Being resilient, they can absorb the losses incurred by the bad decisions while benefitting from the gains from the good ones, thereby moving the company forward. Developed societies have analogous mechanisms and institutions that keep the function and structure viable and advancing under most circumstances.

For poor societies to develop, they must devise and manage resilient systems that maintain stability while fostering innovation and its selective adoption. To function well, though, these systems must be very strongly adapted to the times and to the culture managing them. They must arise from and be developed at the community level and then applied to relatively simple problems and development challenges before being employed at higher management levels to more complex development issues. Concomitantly, the relevant political institutions must approve of and abet the process or new ones will have to be developed that do.

## **True Consultation**

The single tool that will best assist the development of these resilient systems is consultation, as outlined below. As might be expected from a tool that serves a complex set of challenges, true consultation is neither simple nor easy. According to Sinclair (1997), Organic Development- 2010

it is not merely a mechanical process or a specific methodology, but a journey of personal maturation in which success will also depend on the qualities of one's character and personal conduct. Consultation requires therefore constant examination of one's motives and constant adjustment of one's behavior.

While true consultation has a spiritual dimension; participants at all levels of the process are encouraged to develop strong cooperation and association to achieve development. Within this context, the participants become increasingly able to examine any issue from various points of view, together finding the most suitable direction to embark upon, consulting until a solution for collective action emerges. Through consultation, unity of thought is persistently pursued and achieved, and when the thoughts and views of all participants are united, imaginative plans for development and growth of any community can be achieved. Consultation is "no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egoism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision" (UHJ, Wellspring, p.96). "Certainly, in this early stage of growth...the process of consultation may present itself as a challenge, and at times the perfect decision may not be a practical possibility." (Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982).

It is important for the group to remain united in all stages of the decision making process, especially after its final decision has been reached. If the final decision is implemented and it does not produce the desired outcome, the group must reflect and consult on the matter again in unity and solidarity.

Overall, true consultation is a new social institution that shapes and develops people and communities. True consultation is put forward by its proponents as unique and evolutionary, its full potential and powers only gradually being discovered and developed (Vick 1989, and Kolstoe 1995).

According to Vick, "social and economic development requires consultation to restore hope and self-confidence to people who do not recognize their own potential". Although many people are regarded as "underdeveloped", as belonging to the "third world", they are presented with an equal opportunity to participate in any consultative process. First, they begin by creating a greater awareness about their circumstances by listening to others, secondly, by gaining self-confidence in expressing their own ideas, and thirdly by becoming aware of their own abilities to transform their ideas into united action.

True consultation is central to the task of reconceptualizing systems of human relationships. The standard of truth seeking that is required by true consultation is far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize present-day discussion of human affairs (Kolstoe, *Developing Genius*, 10). This ultimate search for truth as a moral and ethical foundation allows a group to arrive at a consensus about the truth and the most appropriate line of action to be taken in any given situation in unity and solidarity.

In any social and economic development project, individuals are called to strive to transcend their individualist perspectives, in order to function as members of a body. Even when a collective body arrives at a decision about an aspect of a project, and some individuals may not fully agree with the decision, they are encouraged to support the decision to preserve and facilitate the learning processes of the group. With regards to development, this kind of approach to decision making and problem solving allows people the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes. They come to understand that true consultation is a process of discovery rather than a magical solution for their issues and problems. Viewed in this light, consultation is the operating expression of justice in any given development practice.

Salmanzadeh states (2007, 443) that It must also be said that many people in developing societies hold their particular spiritual and religious beliefs close to the surface of their daily interactions. These beliefs make true consultation particularly relevant.

He continues by stating that as disenchantment with the top down approach in development increases and as some expert consultants fail to provide suitable solutions to development problems, the decision-making processes of true consultation will continue to provide alternative modes of achievement and models of what constitutes a desirable world of development.

Bringing these two concepts of adaptive management and true consultation together could provide a means for the sharing of the management of a social system by a diverse group of stakeholders to better inform adapted and appropriate decision-making, leading to a unique and adapted development path. The shared management of resources by as much of the diversity within the community as can be harnessed will increase resiliency through decisions that are better informed, the increased options made available for analysis and testing, and an increased commitment to the process. True consultation provides the means for a group to arrive at the decisions that best reflect its member's aspirations and will encourage adoption of actions even at the expense of some members' previously held advantages.

### **Practical Application**

To be successful, the process will have to be learned by communities working on relatively simple local issues that are small and comparatively solvable. Through success with these small steps, the community will gain skills and confidence in their power to manage their own development. They will gradually move the process upscale until the management of complex cross-linked problem solving and community-serving institutions is possible.

This process of building community resiliency through true consultation is not a utopian dream; it has been implemented with some success in Haiti. In 2004 the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) adapted the World Bank-developed Community Driven

Development (CDD) model, being implemented at that time in Northeast Brazil, to the Haitian reality and applied it in two communes, respectively located in the extreme Northeast and Southeast of Haiti along the border with the Dominican Republic.

Some three months of community organization were used to make the community aware of the inclusive nature of the project, to have all of the community based organizations identified, to have all of them elect or appoint a representative to serve on a community development council, to have the council elect an executive committee to run its daily affairs, to train the council in the principles of CDD, and to include the elected local government as a minor participating member of the process. After the training period, the community council requested development project concepts from all participating community organizations, which were then debated in open community forums and whittled down to a prioritized list of those that best fitted the criteria earlier developed by the community.

The chosen concepts were then developed into proposals by their originators and sent to PADF's technical team for vetting only of the technical criteria (sufficient steel in the concrete, for example). Once passed, a contract was signed between the CDD executive committee and the implementing local organization. The follow up was done by the executive committee.

There were a number of instructive impacts of this groundbreaking project:

- there was intense consultation on the most important needs of the community
- the decisions on how to apportion the grants through a combination of project merit and geographic distribution was novel and equitable from both the technical and social viewpoint
- competing organizations routinely worked together, modifying their individual concepts, to enhance their competitiveness for grants
- over several cycles of grants the choices of projects moved from almost exclusively technical (roads, irrigation, pumps, etc.) to significantly social (microenterprise, meeting center for youth, home economics training for girls, etc.)
- unusually in Haiti, women figured largely in the process and in the labor force—even “manning” wheelbarrows on the construction sites
- several approved projects, although well implemented, were not successful from a technical standpoint (fruit transformation into jam, for which the jars were too expensive to permit the product to sell; a road that was approved for 3 Km, but extended to 7 Km by the enthusiasm of the community and which subsequently washed out); in following cycles, similar projects were scrutinized more closely by the committee, creating a vivid institutional memory and local management skills
- during local elections a year or so into the project, two members of the executive committees were elected to local government, largely because of their comportment on the committee and the citizens' belief that they had the capability to run the more complicated government office (this is appropriate, because the project is designed to

progressively turn its management over to local government as it becomes competent and trusted by the community)

- on two occasions, the treasurer of an implementing NGO ran off with or misused project funds; in both cases the person was apprehended and the funds recovered through intense community pressure
- the Haitian government adopted the model and had it implemented nationally, using local and World Bank funds.

Both donors and governments have to understand the process and not attempt to keep control of it. This is much more difficult than it may seem. How can a donor disburse funds to an NGO or directly to a community without knowing in advance what the outputs will be? (Donors and NGOs both have people in place precisely to avoid this sort of “complication”.) National and middle governments may be jealous of the power transferred to local governments and the citizens themselves, etc.

Transferring the responsibility for development to those who have the most to gain by it has several obvious advantages: the process will be more effective and a good deal less expensive, acceptance by communities will be quicker and more complete, the donor exit strategy is built in, and the ever elusive donor coordination problem will largely disappear, as each will be following the common community agenda instead of their own.

This kind of organic, bottom-up, development has begun to prove itself. There is no end to the types of projects that could be implemented in this way. There is much work to be done at the local level before the process should move to the provincial and national levels. Indeed, the development should be organic: while being replaced by other locals newly steeped in participative development practice, the best of the prior batch of local expertise should be democratically moved ever higher to tackle ever more complex systems, until such time as the participants are capable of managing a developed nation that largely corresponds with their aspirations.

This is a process that will take a while to exhibit conclusive results—probably a generation. It is time to get started.

END.

## **Endnotes:**

1. P McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*, Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2000, xlii.; in A. Salmanzadeh, *Bahá'í Consultation and Freireian Dialogue in Development, A Comparative Perspective*, *Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Volume 1 (2007), 414.
2. "Political" refers to those who manage the system in question, whether donors, scientists, business people, or politicians of all levels and stripes.
3. See previous article in this series, "Appropriate Assistance Approaches"

## **Principal Sources:**

The concepts of Adaptive capacity, resilience and Adaptive Co-Management were largely taken from the web site of the Resilience Alliance ([www.resalliance.org](http://www.resalliance.org)) "Research on resilience in Social-Ecological Systems—a basis for sustainability". The author also used information on coping systems derived from work by the Office of Arid Lands Studies of the University of Arizona.

The concept of true consultation was taken primarily from A. Salmanzadeh, *Bahá'í Consultation and Freireian Dialogue in Development, A Comparative Perspective*, *Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Volume 1 (2007) ([www.ojbs.org](http://www.ojbs.org)).

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