

---

## Scholars and Preachers

---

*Ronald Dore*

That there has been a shift over the last 10 years in development talk and writing, from predominant concern with growth to concern with distribution, is undeniable.

About the causes of that shift there may be various views. It is not, I suspect, solely to be explained as a triumphal story of learning from the 'failure' of past policies, nor even as one of increasingly humane enlightenment.

That is why it seems proper to begin an assessment of the basic needs strategy, as the latest version of the distributional concern, by questioning that concern itself. I would like to pose, and offer my answers to, the following four questions. In formulating them I seek to draw a distinction between the scholarly analytical activity of social scientists and the preaching activity of development experts (including those same social scientists). Such a distinction is, of course, old-fashioned; indeed, the view appears to be gaining ground that to seek to make such a distinction is to be guilty of a curiously horrendous kind of naiveté called 'positivism'. I find this guilt easy to live with.

—Is the concentration of scholarly analytical activity on distributional questions justified?

—Are rich country people justified, when behaving in the prescriptive mode, in urging egalitarian-distributional development objectives on poor countries?

—Assuming that they are, is the basic needs strategy an improvement on earlier prescriptions, either in the sense of incorporating any new discoveries of science, or in the sense of incorporating values which we, as enlightened connoisseurs of humane ethics, would recognise to be superior to those of earlier prescriptions?

—Irrespective of the answers to the above questions, is it tactically wise for aid agencies to espouse basic needs strategy as their conception of what a good development policy should be?

### **Research problems: distribution or growth?**

My answer to the first question: No. There are, to be sure, a number of distributional questions which need more analytical work—not least how you *measure* distribution, as Beckerman's recent sceptical note points out (Beckerman 1977). The realistic implications of different alternative technologies, the way different income distributions affect consumption

patterns, hence the structure of demand, of production and hence the volume of employment, the relative productivities of big farmers and small farmers under different conditions, what determines the extent to which the poor get their intended access to public services, etc, are all genuine intellectual problems to which there have already been some notable contributions and need to be more. Too much of the writing on these and similar topics, however, is concerned not so much with showing how things might be different and how certain variables affect other variables, as with adding yet another piece of evidence to the general proposition that nice guys finish last and the poor always get cheated—which is less helpful.

That question apart, it is common ground that the political possibilities of more equal distribution—short of revolutionary changes—are small without growth. Growth, then, is in a sense prior. It is also *intellectually* (though not politically) more difficult. A government which has the political will to secure greater equality does not need experts to tell it how to reduce the span of public sector salaries from 35:1 to 20:1. Arithmetical skills are rarely so scarce. If it decides to put all its new health investment in rural areas, it may be able to use expert advice on the cost-effectiveness of different ways of doing so, but such expertise is not, now, in altogether short supply. How best to use investment funds, however—the long term economic and social implications (relevant to whatever set of values a society is assumed to hold) of putting them in a hydro-electric installation, or a fertiliser plant, or a technical school—is a much more complex analytical problem. How to improve the efficiency of a state steel mill, how to inveigle the wealthy into investing in factories rather than the speculative purchase of urban land, how to set conditions on MNC investment which ensure the maximum local benefits, how to reduce harvest fluctuations or induce farmers to grow for the market in spite of them, how to reduce the time lag between the arrival of a new turnkey plant and the day when every bit of it can be repaired by one's own people—these remain much more problematic and intellectually challenging questions on which scholarly professionals have more potentially to contribute, both those who are happy to talk about 'growth' and those who are prepared to discuss the subject matter provided they can call it 'accumulation'.

More energy, would, I believe, be devoted to these questions if development researchers and theorists were not so concerned—if not to intermingle political

prescription with expertise, at least to show, by the way they deploy their expertise, that they are on the side of the egalitarian angels.

### **To preach or not to preach**

My second question is not about the deployment of expertise, but about our preaching. As people who happen to work on developing country problems and are also political animals with views of our own, most development theorists, apart from and in addition to any scholarly activities, occasionally like to sound off in the 'ought' and 'should' mode in such publications as the *IDS Bulletin*. How justified are we in urging egalitarian policies on Third World governments?

One view about the principle of preaching equality to foreign governments is that one should show a proper diffidence, and in particular not presume on a cultural dependency relationship by assuming that the preachings of intellectuals in the metropolitan rich countries should be of interest to governments of the periphery. As against this one can take one's stand on a basic common humanity: every, but every, man's death diminishes me.

How one feels on the matter is likely to depend on how one feels about nationalism. Some would feel that nationalism should be accounted among the basic needs. That is one view and one which would certainly counsel the diffidence suggested above. Another view is that nationalism, in Bertrand Russell's words, is "undoubtedly the most dangerous vice of our time—far more dangerous than drunkenness, or drugs, or commercial dishonesty, or any of the other vices against which a conventional moral education is directed" (quoted from Russell, 1932 in Ayer, 1972:146). On this view of nationalism one is entitled to ignore the moral significance of frontiers and passports and express oneself with as much passion and commitment about Ugandan or Indian politics as about British politics.

There are two problems with this, however. One has been pointed out by Deepak Lal (1976). If one embraces oneself in the same moral community as the Nigerian physician and the Nigerian peasant, then the gap between their incomes is neither more nor less morally indefensible than the gap between the Nigerian peasant and oneself—and one does have it in one's power to do something about the latter.

Secondly, if one thinks that nationalism is wicked and that one is entitled to rail at Nigerian inequality, one must surely, on proper Kantian principles, grant that what is wicked nationalism for oneself is allowably wicked for Nigerians too. In which case one gives the Nigerian physician a conclusive answer to any suggestions that Nigeria should adopt more egalitarian income distribution policies. "Why should you see my income in relation to that of a

Nigerian peasant? I, as a professional man, belong to, find my soulmates in, hold as my reference group, the international community of physicians. Why should I be paid less than a British doctor? What do I have in common with this peasant fellow? Common Nigerian nationality? Nationality, for God's sake!"

It is a difficult problem, full of ambiguities. I can see how one can conscientiously feel so strongly about making the world a better place that one cuts through these scruples and can be happy to use both the prestige conferred by history on the middle-class of former imperialist powers and the authority of a reputation for expertise, and preach as it were *from* expertise, offering persuasive definitions of the 'true' meaning of development. Personally I find a more diffident stance, and one which seeks always to keep analysis and prescription tidily separate, more comfortable.

There remains the question of how far governments are receptive to egalitarian preaching anyway. It seems to be generally conceded that the typical Third World government is not likely to be much preoccupied with satisfying its population's basic needs. Curiously, it seems more often to be assumed that it is more likely to be concerned with the basic needs of the nation's grandchildren—at least that would seem so judging from the frequency with which the growth versus equity dilemma is treated as primarily a matter of inter-generational distribution. What the Third World rulers actually do set as their objectives is a research topic too much neglected. I suspect that a major motive, over and above survival, is to increase national 'strength' and prestige, to raise the nation's position in the international pecking order and thereby their *own* position in the ranks of the world's rulers, to give Ruritians, especially top Ruritians, greater reason for feeling proud of their Ruritanianness. This, I suspect, is the chief significance of growth for those Third World politicians who are being advised to be less preoccupied with it, and in so far as it is a quest for dignity, which appears in most people's list of basic needs, it is a quest for which one can have some sympathy. It is, at least, one which should be taken into account in every basic needs strategist's reckoning.

### **Basic needs: an improvement on other egalitarian prescriptions?**

The third question is: if one has overcome one's scruples about telling Third World governments what their objectives should be, is the basic needs strategy an improvement on earlier egalitarian prescriptions, or should one shrug it off as simply a routine product of the internal dynamics of the International Development Conference Community, reflecting the accelerating rate of slogan obsolescence? (Itself,

presumably, a consequence of the growth of the world economy—more GNP, more IDSs, more international agencies, more rallies of the IDCC in Rome and Bucharest, more cosy gatherings in Bellagio and Cocoyoc, more money for research, but even more people competing for it and hence a higher premium on a nice new attractive slogan in which to wrap a research project or the proposal for a new conference or a new international agency.)

Perhaps one could phrase the question this way: would a hypothetical government which adopted a basic needs strategy be doing something markedly different from, for example, one which took as its bible the IBRD-IDS prescription for *Redistribution with Growth*? Does it, first, incorporate new insights or discoveries? Is it based on newly discovered facts about the structure of the economy or society?

There is by now a good deal of literature which genuinely contributes to our knowledge of distribution issues and their relation to growth. I cannot, however, recall seeing in the basic needs literature references to *research* findings which lead one directly to the consideration of basic needs. Nor do the plans for basic needs research with which every institute in the business has armed itself appear to be characterised by hypotheses which are either clear in their formulation or likely to be interesting and illuminating when tested.

So does it mark a political or moral advance? The amorphous nature of the basic needs doctrine makes that also a difficult question to answer.

Most definitions of a Basic Needs strategy include standard references to the right to productive employment; building up the production infrastructure; an emphasis on the production of basic wage goods, and even (though usually in a vague form) some reference to 'Redistribution with Growth' concerns with changing the primary distribution of income by allowing the lowest income groups access to resources. These things are not new. What are new are first, participation—an illustration, I suppose, of the rapidity with which the welfare ideologies thrown up by advanced twentieth century capitalism are transmitted to developing countries—and second, the state provision of community welfare services.

But how much of the latter, and at the expense of what other objectives? If Basic Needs means more state expenditure on basic services, must it not also mean lower growth—assuming that adoption of the basic needs objectives will not, of itself, alter revenue-collecting capacities.

Not at all, is one answer. One only assumes so if one is bemused by national accounting conventions. Investment in a textile mill produces cheaper

clothing, saving a villager from cold and loss of dignity. Investment in a water supply system saves him from enteritis. The first is in the market sphere and counts in GNP, the second does not; does that really imply difference in the growth in satisfactions? The question needs more than my commonsense economics, but presumably the answer is that the difference lies in the long term growth prospects. Both may have backward linkages, but the textile cycle additionally yields profits and taxes which feed into further investment; the water cycle has no comparable multiplier effect unless the enteritis was actually hampering the villager's productivity or unless the water is paid for. At any rate, the point is that if increased public welfare expenditure is indeed *the* distinctive feature of the basic needs strategy, it would be better if this were made plain and the relation to the growth/national strength objectives of Third World governments not glossed over.

### Basic needs and aid

The final question concerns basic needs and aid. "A basic needs approach has a promising potential for reanimating public support for development aid". Thus the latest DAC Annual Report (p. 94), and just as the original shift of concern towards distribution questions sprang partly from discussions of aid, so it is perhaps not fanciful to suppose that the need on the part of those in the aid field to reanimate flagging public support plays a considerable role in explaining the current discussion of basic needs.

It may well work to some degree. There is nothing much but humanitarian sentiment left for the aid lobby to draw on (dire threats to the security of the rich North if it does not take the poor South seriously have never seemed very realistic) and it is always genuine and deserving poverty which has best loosened purse strings.

But what about the recipients of aid? There are formidable problems in trying to give basic needs aid to countries whose governments are interested in something else. I believe those problems will be exacerbated even in governments with relatively egalitarian policies by suspicion of the motives of the rich-country delegates cosily gathered in the OECD chateau.

First they will see basic needs fulfilment as being at the expense of growth, at the expense, therefore, of the assertion of national strength they seek—a denial, in other words, of their quest for equality in the comity of nations. It would be surprising if they did not bristle at the finality with which MacNamara uses the record of the last 25 years to claim ("The Speech", September 1977) that catching up in GNP terms "was never a realistic objective in the first place" for developing countries, and that they should, rather, "seek to narrow the gap . . . in terms of the

quality of life: in nutrition, literacy, life expectancy, and the physical and social environment”—though not, presumably, in terms of the particular ways Mr MacNamara uses high income to improve *his* physical and social environment and enhance the quality of his life (not all, by any means, ways involving “positional goods” incapable of being generalised—or shared).

What is more, they are likely to see this advice as being far from disinterested—as reflecting the rich countries’ concern with limits-to-growth projections of the world’s resource capacity: “they can’t all be as rich as we are, and it would be wrong to encourage them to compete with us for scarce resources in a competition they are bound to lose. Best if they are contented with satisfying basic needs. And, anyway, why would they want to lumber themselves with the environmental destruction, the strains and ugliness of machine civilization, which we have wished upon ourselves when they have their own so much more spiritual way of life . . .” etc.

Finally, though, one possible point in favour of basic needs talk in the aid sector of the International Development Conference Community. If it helps to

shift aid thinking away from the ‘more to the poorest’ kind of charity towards a bureaucratic world taxation system in which all mankind is guaranteed a minimum living level “as of right” (in Beveridge terms), and all mankind is liable to tax in order to finance it—if it points towards a world in which nationalism is genuinely eroded and a universal moral community is created to match the global nature of modern capitalism, so that income transfers become as automatic as they now are through the fiscal and welfare systems of individual states—if that is what the advocates of a basic needs strategy have in mind as their long-term goal, then I would be very happy to cheer them on.

#### References

- Ayer, A. J.: 1972, *Russell*, Fontana/Collins Glasgow, (Quoted from *Education and the Social Order*, 1932)
- Beckerman, W., 1977, ‘Some Reflections on Redistribution with Growth’ *World Development* Vol 5, No 8, August
- Lal, Deepak, 1976, ‘Distribution and Development: A Review Article’. *World Development* Vol. 4, No 9