
Political Demands and Essential Guarantees : Editorial

A new banner—basic needs

That people caught up in the development process have 'basic needs' and that these have not been met should have come as no surprise. The fact that in the last two years or so it has in one view almost incredible. With the new concern for basic needs strategies are we admitting that development institutions simply forgot that people had basic needs? And are we now to applaud their rediscovery when to anyone else the need to satisfy them was self evident?

Partly, of course, the necessity was not self evident. The strategies based on growth in GNP had argued that growth would itself take care of poverty and that any stubborn pockets remaining could be taken care of at a later stage. Partly the recognition comes because orthodox comparative research documenting both the growth of absolute poverty and an increase in inequality is both tentative and relatively recent. Partly, too, the political, technical and administrative difficulties of redistributing the benefits of growth were vastly underestimated, if they were ever seriously thought of at all, and were further clouded by assumptions about political will.

Politics, however, is less about 'will' than about specific and complex structures of interest and action. Once systems of production and distribution have been set up to achieve growth it is very difficult to reverse their activities. Existing price signals run counter to the production of low cost goods and institutions develop a life of their own. The complexes of largely inflexible procedures and interests embedded in the existing social matrix of administration and politics continue to exclude the disadvantaged while existing consumption and production patterns create groups dedicated to defending the status quo. The 'redistribution with growth' model saw the importance of these factors and argued that redistribution had to be built gradually into the pattern of growth by taking new increments in growth and redistributing those rather than attacking existing distortions directly.

The difficulties of including the excluded within development projects would remain, however, and the timetable within which to alter the pattern of production and distribution through increments

would presumably exclude the current generation from tangible benefits. It was not perhaps surprising that the new themes required by development agencies, as they followed their own institutional interests, would be more radical, stressing the urgency of minimum needs (perhaps even at the cost of growth), a timetable of one generation or less, and a commitment to expanded service delivery and supply capacity. So 'basic needs', 'basic human needs', 'minimum needs' and other variants are now with us.

The new terms are superficially more appealing than, say, 'absolute poverty eradication'. Would any politician want to mount a campaign for 'redistribution with growth' when he could appeal to the obligation to satisfy basic needs? In what way could a poor peasant farmer, moreover, demand 'integrated rural development'? His needs are for food, to improve (or even keep) his land, for more (or less) water, the chance for his children to leave rural poverty through education and urban employment, and so on. Let others worry about development strategies and the aesthetics of terminology: the peasant farmer and the urban worker know what *their* essential needs are and that existing development patterns rarely help. 'Basic needs' ought, then, to bring a freshness to the discussion which was previously lacking.

But will the new approach really help? 'Basic needs' is often referred to in this *Bulletin* as a slogan, even by those writers who are sympathetic to its broad aims. Are we then to take the discussion seriously or dismiss it as the latest twist of fashion? Who really wants basic needs strategies—since the poor can rarely make themselves heard and have difficulty in pressing their demands? Is the current interest due—as Ronald Dore asks—to an increase in humane enlightenment and a disciplined learning from the failure of past policies? Are not the intellectual problems of growth prior, and basic needs at best a distraction from this task?

The other papers share many of his misgivings but are equally convinced that it is necessary either to contribute to policy formation in order to meet popular basic needs or to analyse the forces which lead to their frustration. Present basic needs policy interventions may be naive, crude or misjudged (or all of these) and basic

needs difficult to define, but the satisfaction of popular basic needs as the critical goal of development efforts appears to be above question. Or does this acceptance merely indicate a misplaced and uncritical egalitarianism? Certainly while efforts and analysis to help the disadvantaged and excluded meet their primary requirements are accepted, it is the difficulty rather than the possibility of them doing so in the face of economic and political constraints which is emphasized in each of the contributions.

The first three articles concentrate on the referents and flavour of the concept. The last six, having examined the concept and given qualified approval to its concern for minimum conditions, take up more specific themes. They differ considerably in their priorities, but are all concerned to set basic needs problems within a framework of economic forces and processes of political and administrative choice. In varying ways they attempt to specify the degree to which there is room for governments and institutions to make choices which favour basic needs. To that extent they all touch on 'the politics of basic needs'—the theme of this extended editorial.

Background to the debate

One would not want to argue that basic needs is an entirely new approach to development. Dharam Ghai is worried that zealots have hindered their own cause by making excessive claims for its originality. Bernard Schaffer reminds us that a concern with minimum subsistence levels is at least as old as political economy itself and that there is a great deal to be learnt from the British experience with minima, charity and welfare.

Reginald Green's introduction to the background of the immediate debate, however, places it in the context of the ILO's 1976 World Employment Conference and the main influences which had led to the emergence of explicit basic needs discussions on that occasion. He argues that while the work of certain major international agencies—for example, UNEP, ILO and IBRD—had contributed much, the specific country experiences of China and Tanzania and—in different ways—Taiwan and South Korea have been of great importance in stimulating the discussion. A host of other country reports and missions have also played their part. Martin Godfrey, for example, states in his article that the ILO Mission to Kenya was essentially a basic needs mission although it did not use the term.

International agencies have, nonetheless, been the principal protagonists in the debate. The ILO

expanded its concern with employment—first to unemployment, then to the unorganised and rural employment sectors and finally to income distribution and basic needs; the IBRD absorbed its existing concerns with absolute poverty eradication and redistribution through growth within 'minimum needs'; UNEP began to speak of the 'inner' environmental limits of basic needs as a complement to ecological 'outer' limit considerations; UNICEF has integrated its smaller aid projects for children and women into a basic services approach; and so on.

Modelling and counting

Many of the reports which have influenced the approach have been based on global models and international prescriptions. They deal, it is true, with social and political structures, but as items in the model and obstacles to be overcome, not as the difficult and intractable problems they undoubtedly are. Perhaps that is inevitable and, as an initial step, useful. A picture of destitution in clear quantitative terms may heighten its urgency. People bored by technical discussions and suspicious of politics may respond to the fact that "world military expenditures are equivalent to about two-fifths of the combined gross domestic product of all Third World countries—roughly the equivalent to the entire income, in cash and kind, of the poorest half of the world's population, some 1.800 million people of whom at least half live in real poverty, if not destitution" (Jolly 1978).

'Basic Needs', however, begins to look increasingly like a mechanical quantitative exercise. First, identify the individual goods and services which will make up the minimum bundle to meet basic needs. (These will, of course, need to reflect national and local priorities but will also invariably include elements of shelter, food, clothing or whatever else clamours for attention.) Second, set minimum 'socially-determined' target levels for each good or service. Third, having identified the package and set minimum targets it is necessary to create a system of priorities and cost against 'other developmental objectives' (It may, however, be those other objectives which frustrate basic needs in the first place!) If, at the second stage, target groups have also been closely specified then, almost certainly, new institutions will be created to implement the programme. If not, the basic needs planner will need to identify projects appropriate to the overall strategy for existing institutions and this will require a new statistical monitoring and evaluation unit to ensure that data are collected and analysed.

By pointing to targets and specifying the conditions for reaching them, these exercises might conceivably make planning possible: they are also likely to create new institutions. Some calculations do, indeed, confirm how few resources need to be diverted from, say, military expenditure or luxury consumption goods in order to meet basic needs for food, drinking water, domestic fuel and so on. But knowing the dimensions of poverty does not ensure action. Moreover, other calculations would reveal that more is involved than easy trade-offs: subsidies and transfers are so easily misappropriated and basic services cannot be sustained, as Christopher Colclough and Percy Selwyn show. In a world where perhaps 70 million people depend directly and indirectly on armaments production and the military for their jobs (Jolly: *ibid*) one cannot be too optimistic about the availability of trade-offs between guns and bread or guns and water.

Planning and participation

Much of the basic needs discussion seems to assume an audience of international and national planners who are already working in a favourable political context—or in none at all. Any obligatory references to participation are usually vague or naïve. In the absence of a sense for the structure of political and class demands for basic needs the concept can easily become a damaging and unrealistic technical exercise in “count, cost and supply” (Cassen: n.d. mimeo).

Whatever caveats are entered about participation, sensitivity, and intentions, schemas which bear any relationship to the standard quantitative exercise suggested above are almost certainly incompatible with genuine participation. Reg Green, indeed, feels it absolutely necessary to distinguish between basic needs approaches which treat participation as an additional item in the list of requirements and basic *human* needs approaches which have participation at the centre of their concerns and “involve a form of human liberation”.

There need be few doubts about the ability of the basic needs approach to absorb additional needs—participation of course; human rights almost certainly; security, nationalism and much else besides. The core of much of the discussion, however, has been about minimum material needs with other needs in a peripheral position. One suspects moreover that the difficulty of operationalising ‘participation’, even if this could be specified, will lead national officials to turn immediately to the safer options of rations and goods. As Bernard Schaffer points out, officials

have to limit their work to problems which they can manage but not quite solve: they rarely find participation manageable.

It could be argued, of course, that if a clear sense of priority and objective is there, participation and political negotiation will fall into place afterwards and that those who argue for participation at all or most planning stages are simply utopian. The best that is possible may be only the second best of starting from a top level political and official agreement and moving towards as much consultation and participation as possible. This may even be a very good second best when we consider that previous development strategies had simply assumed that participation was achieved through market outcomes. At least, it could be argued, in the basic needs approach the diagnosis is right even if its accomplishments are still to come.

Approach or strategy

The *Bulletin* is necessarily incomplete: it does not, for example, include papers which are prepared to argue for a national poverty mapping approach. Nor is there any attempt to define a basic needs strategy. Most contributors appear happy to accept that ‘basic needs’ can only be an approach, not an overall strategy. Others simply accept an agenda of analytical and operational problems: for example, the operation of subsidies and basic services—as evidence of ‘the basic’. More radically, Reginald Green suggests that basic human needs strategies are country specific, involve the assessment of national, socially-determined needs, and rely on the circumstances of participation in that country. Any attempt to arrive at a single strategy would be illusory.

In addition, no attempt is made to include the range of extended country studies which would be necessary to establish the merits of basic needs approaches *in situ*. The one article based on a single country experience—Martin Godfrey on Kenya—serves to indicate a more general problem rather than to record a particular basic needs strategy in operation. His paper shows that governments *can* implement policies and reforms opposed to the interests of some dominant groups and which a mechanical reading-off of dominant interests would never have predicted. To succeed, however, a basic needs approach would have to implement a core of mutually reinforcing reforms, and there is little indication of this.

Lists and linkages

One can only agree with Manfred Bienefeld that ‘almost by definition’ basic needs are democratic choices. But presumably only in the sense that

they are of generalisable human interest. People are never likely to be asked to 'vote for the basic', although in choosing, say, "The Workers and Peasant Peoples Party" where, very rarely, there is an opportunity to do so, they may come as close to it as possible. Yet, given this choice, certain sections of the poor who might be expected to favour basic needs approaches may appear to vote against it, not because of 'false consciousness' but because the issue for or against basic needs could never be presented in simple, 'either/or' terms. And in how many countries is genuine choice possible and the ability of the poor to press their demands without repression guaranteed or available?

How, then, *can* a concern with minimum conditions be distinguished in action and choice? This is a point which Bernard Schaffer stresses—look at actual moments in a programme when there was a choice between more or less immediate equality and draw implications from that rather than attempting to list needs and then supply them.

But is this merely academic quibbling? Of course needs are not only material and situations are complex, but in the absence of the ideal mustn't we choose the second best?

There are, however, no short cuts. The complex linkage between needs and the stratification of political demands makes intervention difficult and unless interventions are integrated and carefully analysed they may well accentuate inequality and destitution by making the very poor even more vulnerable to change. Linkages, moreover, may suggest less direct ways of meeting needs. I can imagine education being treated as a third or fourth priority behind, say, food, shelter and water. Yet giving priority to education could result in people learning to boil water or to accept a more balanced diet. Employment or food may be ranked as more pressing than housing, but housing and a right to residence are necessary in order to secure a base and begin the search for employment and food.

Exclusion and minima

Possibly the single most problematic defect in the basic needs approach is that it is based so explicitly on a model of individual need instead of on the relationship of (necessarily social and political) activities. The fundamental appeal and urgency implied in the very words 'basic' and 'needs' reflects both the strength and weakness of the approach. Their resonance confirms that there are deep and ambiguous political commitments and long traditions of social thought

underlying our response to this populist idea of an individual struggle in the face of hostility. Bernard Schaffer explores certain of these ambiguities and reminds us that populism has been a force for both conservatism and radicalism. Peter Worsley once pointed out, to illustrate this general point, that fundamentalism and populism in the Canadian prairies had produced both left wing and right wing provincial governments side by side (1964).

Dharam Ghai argues that basic needs approaches are not strong on political or class analysis but that neither are others which have gone before. Against this it could be argued that neo-classical economics is based on the relationship between activities, even if they are only narrowly economic, and that there is much in the basic needs approach which actually inhibits the systematic study of political relations. Nonetheless, its concern with minimum conditions and the vulnerability and exclusion of certain groups does point in the right direction.

Demands for minimum conditions can, conceivably, arise from personal, cultural or national groups whose whole way of life, based on subsistence consumption, is threatened by an extension of commercial relations. These new opportunities may well increase the total profitability of their activities but leave them, in bad seasons, very vulnerable to drought and disease. Many peasant insurrections in South-East Asia, for example, have been tied to threats to the dependability of minimum levels of subsistence (Scott 1976).

If we examine actual political demands for basic or minimum conditions in the context of the stratified nature of society we see that it is not just the poor who demand basic conditions (and usually these least of all) but also intermediate groups and governments too. Dharam Ghai suggests that the concept is not at all unpopular among governments—quite the reverse. In their search for themes to express the range of activities their departments are involved in, what better vehicle for consensus and agreement than 'basic needs'? It does not, after all, necessarily imply equity or a radical redistribution of assets and income. It allows governments to argue that they are both expanding public services and protecting groups in danger of becoming destitute. This expansion, however, rarely benefits the most disadvantaged: benefits are usually taken-up by less vulnerable groups, including those who are still recognizably poor citizens (by international and even national standards) such as lower-paid government servants and technicians. A 'basic

needs' theme can also allow interventions to maintain or further consolidate the segmentation of labour markets, by tying access to public services very firmly to formal sector employment. The recent growth in the size and coverage of social security systems—as noted for certain countries and sectors in Latin America and also documented for other regions—usually has two results. It further excludes those outside the formal sector by more firmly tying credit and access to services to regular employment in larger institutions, and further subsidises the extension of loans and services to better-placed intermediate groups by employing the enforced savings of the lower-paid members.

Vulnerability and exclusion, then, applies not only to those who are destitute and near destitution but also to groups who now fear or experience exclusion following political and economic change. It is these groups who tend to press for minimum conditions and services if they can find ways of doing so, and who are most concerned to protect themselves by formal agreement and public provision.

An analysis of basic needs in terms of the stratified character of political demands underscores Bernard Schaffer's point that if basic needs means anything it means exclusion from the benefits which go to other groups. It would also need to examine Alejandro Portes' use of a four-class schema to describe the flow of consumption goods from informal sector workers to prevent dramatic falls in the living standards of intermediate workers. Manfred Bienefeld appears to disagree: there are, he argues, no specifically economic limits in a competitive economy to a fall in consumption levels.

Incidence and access

The stratification of demands critically affects the implementation of projects and their 'take-up'. Even with massive investment programmes not everyone can take up benefits immediately. Moreover, whatever attempts are made to standardise goods and services, location and timing considerations mean that some service items and some goods are more desirable than others, and this leads to competition which must be mediated by institutional allocation. Administrative institutions always exercise discretion and inevitably end up granting access to those 'who have shown capacity', 'who can pay' etc. Christopher Colclough shows—for education services—that attempts to build up dual service systems in isolation from other social and economic changes leads to such great pressure

to upgrade the projects that the whole programme is jeopardized. Those who gain access to rural education centres are not long satisfied with what they see as inferior schooling. They want routes to more desirable employment not more relevant education. Is the implication that *all* people will come to see 'basic education' as only a temporary expedient or is this view restricted to those who gain entry in the early stages of a programme when there are few alternatives? Will, that is, the problems of privileged access and the apparent inability of administrative institutions to steer benefits away from better-off and intermediate groups disappear when more resources are available? One implication of Bernard Schaffer and Percy Selwyn's contributions is that they will not: scarcity is always relative. Public administration and its inclusions and exclusions cannot be assumed away. Bernard Schaffer tells us, even with a high absolute level of resources.

Percy Selwyn argues that even when generous subsidies are provided for essential goods and services, difficult questions of incidence, benefit and cost remain. Their effect on employment and consumption and the level of benefit to any particular group is uncertain. Indeed, a full analysis of benefit and cost would require an examination of the whole fiscal system. But is even this sufficient to show the full extent of transfers? We see in Alejandro Portes' article that any formal system of subsidies may be more than offset by subsidies provided to the consumption of intermediate groups and to the profits of owners by the production of informal sector wage goods and by the cheapness of labour.

Essential guarantees

We are left with a conundrum. There are serious doubts about the ability of governments to implement and sustain sets of mutually reinforcing 'basic needs' reforms. Nonetheless, in response to political demands from groups and institutions themselves those same or new institutions will need to intervene with basic needs programmes and projects. There is a further puzzle. Bureaucratic interventions are essential to qualify the competitive pressures of the market, yet intervention may well create a further dependence on state power. Too much may be at stake in one's consumption pattern to risk opposing a particular official or institution so that, in time, significant aspects of consumption come to depend on the exclusions and inclusions of administrative programmes with few alternatives available to certain categories of the population. The seriously poor and vulnerable come to judge expanded service delivery as a permanent solution to a

permanent collective problem yet, at the same time, equally recognize and fiercely resent its systematic and costly exclusions and inclusions. What can be done? Some contributions imply that, in the short run, probably not much. No doubt the fully-fledged basic human needs strategy Reginald Green advocates or the mobilized participation suggested by Bernard Schaffer are ultimately essential. Of one, however, we must ask for further details; of the other we must question if it is yet available.

Rights to participate, rights to freedom and the legal redress of grievances or even the right to the satisfaction of basic needs are too abstract: the rights are too easily appropriated by those with power and means and too easily eroded for those already disadvantaged. What is required is the opportunity for the vulnerable and seriously poor to press their demands and to negotiate routine institutional routes for their satisfaction and to have their gains and specific negotiated rights incorporated within the machinery of the state itself. Just as there are now inherent institutional biases against those groups least capable of taking-up benefits, and a functional resistance to the alteration of rules of allocation in their favour, there *could* be a bias towards certain essential guarantees. To achieve it would require, for example, a critical and evolving analysis of institutional action and procedure and a confrontation between the private reality of the official who sees poverty and contradiction

everywhere and the language of his institution which cannot admit that there are insoluble problems. The Chinese experience suggests that the political process must evolve, and the State then guarantee, a set of sustainable demands which are close to the aspirations of peasants and workers. These may include, as in China, the guarantee of a decent burial as well as more material requirements. 'Essential guarantees' might in fact be a more accurate description of the aspirations of some basic needs advocates, and a better rallying cry.

To those who would argue that political conflict is best described in more neutral language, one can only reply that to do so is to invite development bureaucracies to impose their own view of 'needs'. To those who ask what it would mean to arrive at essential guarantees in Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City or Jakarta one can only say that it would have to include an analysis of economic pressures and processes, and an acceptance of political and administrative choice and the possibility of mobilized participation.

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