

DRAFT BULLETIN ARTICLE

SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE CONCEPT OF 'BASIC NEEDS'

To question 'basic needs' seems perverse. Their absolute priority must be obvious and above any question of political ideology! Would it be better that a government left the 'basic needs' of its public unsatisfied? Is it not preferable that aid agencies, such as the World Bank, should finance projects that help raise the income of peasants rather than latifundistas?

One of the functions, however, of those outside official bureaucracies is to raise questions about current fashions in policy, however meritorious they appear. I shall try to do this here - but to end on a rather more positive note.

Let me start by making it clear that I do not agree with those who argue that/talk of 'basic needs' is simply a diversion from the real task, preparing for social revolution. In its extreme form, the argument runs that any relief of basic needs postpones the revolution, so the worse social conditions are, the better - which really is perverse. Revolution can hardly be considered a general solution to social problems in all the countries of the world. It involves heavy social costs at best while it is being carried out (and even heavier ones if the attempt fails), whereas the benefits are long-term and speculative: typically conditions are very hard/at least a decade after a revolution. Besides, it is simply not on the agenda for the foreseeable future in the

great majority of countries, if one allows for the necessary coincidence of both the internal and external pre-conditions.

However, Marxism provides its adherents with some advantages. They are unlikely to make one common ^{assumption,} / that the typical government wants to satisfy basic needs - which implies that if it is not doing so, this must be due to ignorance about their extent and whereabouts, or about how to satisfy them. That is simply naive. No politician of experience needs a social scientist to tell him (or her) where to find poverty or what forms it takes. He may well not know, especially in a large country, the number of overcrowded dwellings or how many are undernourished on any particular standard. But he will be aware of the rough dimensions of these problems, unless he has been cloistered from social reality, in which case he is unlikely to bother to read a professional analysis.

Nor / is there anything mysterious about how to relieve poverty in most countries. It means transferring income and assets (especially land and houses) from those who own property to those who do not. If a government fails to do this, the reason can hardly lie in a lack of statistics and competent social scientists to analyse them; it must be found in the absence of motivation or opportunity, i.e. basically in the balance of political forces. The political leadership may be apathetic about social problems or even determined not to solve them (because this would mean the end of cheap labour),

whatever their public statements and promises.

Alternatively, and perhaps more commonly, they may believe they are unable to achieve a major redistribution of income, since this creates hostility, which can become violent, among not merely big property-holders, but also army officers, managers, doctors, engineers, public officials, journalists, many organised workers and farmers, etc., not to speak of foreign corporations and governments. One possible consequence of rapid social change which emerges more clearly as policy simultaneously creates purchasing power and disrupts systems of production, is a shortage of various basic goods and services, leading to further and more determined opposition (the cumulative process that undermined the Allende government).

So, except in the aftermath of a profound revolution (not just an electoral triumph of a Left-wing party), even governments genuinely committed to social progress normally try to achieve it indirectly, i.e. by siphoning off part of the surplus generated by economic growth and using this to meet what we now call 'basic needs'. They may have little choice if they want to stay in office - and this is an aim even social revolutionaries can rationalise.


One feature of this approach, ^{as a tendency} which might strike us as odd if it were not so common, is that its very proclamation encourages people to look to the State for the solution of their economic problems, perhaps inhibiting the political activity that would actually be necessary to induce the government to

implement what they proclaim. It may also discourage people's attempts to solve their economic problems themselves, where this is feasible.

also
Questions are/raised by the definition of basic needs. These are usually described - e.g. in "The Basic Needs Approach to Development" (ILO, 1977) - as consisting of:-

- (i) Personal consumption items - food, shelter, clothing;
- (ii) Access to public services - water, health, education;
- (iii) The opportunity to work. (1)

Though there is often a reference in the documents to 'non-material needs', these are not in fact specified in any detail. A conspicuous example could be personal safety from police or private violence, but this seems completely neglected. There are references to 'human rights' but the conditions are not spelled out, in terms of due process of law, or checks on bureaucratic power, no doubt because of the political constraints on international organisations.

An obvious gap is the fundamental need that one's social group - whether defined by 

(1) This is sometimes treated as a means to meeting consumption needs rather than an end in itself. There is rarely any reference to basic needs at work (freedom from toxic materials, shelter, interesting tasks, etc.). *The approach is, like economics itself, very consumer-oriented.*

class, occupation, caste, race, region, religion, language or sex - should not be despised, dominated or discriminated against, a need which people evidently sometimes value more than life itself.⁽¹⁾ The concentration on 'basic needs' in absolute terms may divert attention from relative poverty, i.e. distributional issues - and one is bound to say that this makes it convenient for many governments.

The basic needs approach also makes it more difficult to extend development studies to countries which suffer from relative poverty but not absolute - such as Britain. This could inhibit one of the most important trends in this field in recent years, a tendency to treat 'development' as the task faced in all countries, including those already industrialised.

A more fundamental question is raised by the way in which some needs are identified as basic. The ILO document cited refers to a conference resolution on "the participation of people in making the decisions that affect them".⁽²⁾ Yet if the public participated in the identification of their own needs, they might very well not make the same choices as are made for them in official documents. People reveal by their conduct how they actually perceive their basic needs. Many,

(2) There is in fact little clue on how participation is to be achieved. There is a reference to people using "organisations of their own choice". Presumably, in Western Europe and North America, this refers to things called governments, but in most of the rest of the world it is tantamount to calling for a revolution (or counter-revolution).

(1)

for example, devote considerable resources of time and money, which might otherwise go into meeting their officially defined 'basic needs', to rituals of various kinds, such as religious services, baptisms, marriages, funerals, carnivals, coronations, etc. This is illustrated vividly and frequently in many Asian countries by visibly undernourished people putting rice onto altars or into the begging bowls of Buddhist monks. Sometimes peasants will neglect their fields to take part in ceremonies that go on for several days. In Britain a high degree of importance is attached, perhaps especially among the working classes, to a decent funeral: saving for it (via 'friendly societies', 'industrial insurance', 'slate clubs', etc), is among the first charges on the household budget.

In all countries, households at or below any official 'poverty line' spend money on radios, television sets, sporting events, alcohol, tobacco and other narcotics, gambling, etc, at the expense of food.⁽²⁾ The only way such behaviour can be reconciled with the 'basic needs' approach is to assume that people do not know their own needs. Like all forms of the 'false consciousness' doctrine, this takes one along a familiar path that starts with trying to educate people and ends with the forcible repression of criticism of bureaucratic decisions.

(1) This is a matter of common observation, but it is also well documented - e.g. John Wells, "The diffusion of durables in Brazil and its implications for recent controversies concerning Brazilian development" (Cambridge Journal of Economics, Vol 1, No 3, Sept 1977). Wells points out that the data show an increasing tendency/to purchase durables, at the expense of increasing undernourishment.

Anyway, is consumer behaviour necessarily so irrational?

Does the official perception of 'need' perhaps reflect the perceptions of those who have never suffered real poverty

- or faced the need to find some escape from it? *More fundamentally are the emphases on 'basic needs' and 'participation' even reconcilable?*

One implication of the difference between official and private perceptions of need is that to raise a household's income - whatever its other justification - is no guarantee whatever that the 'basic needs' of its members will be met.

In his pioneering studies of social conditions in York, Rowntree⁽¹⁾ developed the useful concept of 'secondary poverty' to denote the economic status of a household whose income was strictly sufficient to cover 'human needs' (as he called them), which were however not met because the income was spent on inappropriate goods and services - so that its diet, for example, was inadequate. Unsurprisingly, this turned out to be much commoner than 'primary poverty', which is due to income being so low that these needs could not be met however it was spent.

(1) One common characteristic of most of the research of international organisations is to ignore most previous professional work on the same subject. This is strikingly revealed by the preface to the ILO study, which says "The idea of basic needs ... has evolved out of the growing concern over recent decades about the increasing poverty and inequality in the Third World." These few words dismiss all the work of the pioneers - to take only British names in the last century, Booth and Boyd-Orr spring immediately to mind, apart from Rowntree. The theoretical contribution of Maslow is also apparently forgotten. The remark quoted would be like saying that the idea of terms of trade has evolved out of debates at UNCTAD. The price of such neglect is that past advances are not built on.

There is another source of deprivation which cannot be removed simply by raising household incomes, but which is usually overlooked, because very difficult to measure (and also to reconcile with some ideologies): households which are not even in secondary poverty, on Rowntree's definition, may in fact include one or more members (the women, the young or the elderly) who are undernourished or in ill health because of maldistribution within the household or failure to make use of available medical services. On the other hand, some households may be able to meet their needs through transfers from others (e.g. the food parcels rural households send to their relatives in the cities, or the cash going in the reverse direction, or the multitude of gifts and loans between neighbours or friends). Finally, individuals and thus households vary greatly of course in their needs, due to differences in metabolism, height, weight, amount of exercise, health, etc, so any uniform yardstick based simply on age and sex (such as calorie requirements) is bound to be misleading. (1)

1) But not with Womens Lib.

(2) Since this paper is ^{mainly} about conceptual ^{and political} problems, I pass over the difficulty of measuring income. This is in fact almost impossible in countries with a mostly rural population, because many, perhaps most, economic activities will be unrevealed by household budget enquiries (and some are very difficult to estimate). See "Seers versus Lipton on Urban Bias" (IDS Discussion Paper 116, 1977). There are also well-known problems in measuring illiteracy, ill-health, undernourishment, etc.

These considerations suggest that those who assume that governments can and should meet basic needs ought to prefer selective policies, and delivery systems that identify individuals in need and supplement their consumption, to global policies that raise the income of households, or measures such as food subsidies.

But it would be one thing to argue that a government has some right to intervene in the income and expenditure patterns of its citizens: quite another to claim that a foreign government can or should do so. The fashionable insistence that foreign aid should be devoted to meeting basic needs is understandable, in view of the tendency of economic growth in the past to favour those already well above any poverty line, who have also often benefitted most from aid projects (e.g. hospitals in the main cities).

But, in the first place, aid administrators cannot easily identify projects which meet basic needs: they would need to be experts on ^{the} local socio-economic system. The network of causality is too complex. The rules of thumb that typically have to be used suggest that aid should not be extended to a big capital-intensive project in the capital, such as a steelworks: but it is possible under some circumstances that such a project will help the relaxation of a foreign exchange constraint, enabling increased purchases to be made of inputs such as fertilisers and materials for manufacturing,

raising employment and the incomes of the poor in both town and country. On the other hand, the main consequence of aid to a credit agency for small farmers may be to increase the rents they have to pay (in cash or kind) and raise land prices.

Aid is in any case harder to administer precisely if an attempt is made to find many small projects far from the capital. Moreover, the attempt by a donor agency to influence ~~the~~

the government's expenditure pattern may well be thwarted by 'fungibility'. (1) *At root the problem is due to the difficulty of penetrating the screen of government and reaching those actually in need.*

More important
~~More basic~~ questions arise about the propriety and diplomatic cost of trying to influence the pattern of use of resources in a foreign country. If this practice appears necessary, the explanation is basically that aid is required to help both the donor and the recipient. Its use to increase the donor's political influence and to back its commercial initiatives may lead to selecting recipient governments which have to be coerced into putting forward socially acceptable projects. (It could even be argued that precisely those closest governments with the/political and economic links to donors are the least likely to be really trying to meet the basic

(1) The concept of 'fungibility' was an invention of Hans Singer (see "External Aid: For Plans or Projects" (Economic Journal, Sept., 1965). It refers to the ability of a government to substitute another project for one less acceptable to the donor but then to carry out the latter anyway with appropriations released by not having to finance the former.

needs of their population.) No borrower likes conditions to loans, (1) and an aid agency that heavily emphasises 'basic needs' will soon find itself in conflict with nationalism, which could also be considered a basic need. *At root the problem is one of penetrating the vision of government to reach*

Thus there are dangers in the approach. It encourages public passivity and paternalism; it diverts attention away from distribution and the problems of all save the poorest countries; and it implies interventionist aid policies. This brings out a point that may have a more general application. To recognise that some problem like basic needs is important (which is of course indeed undeniable) does not imply that it will necessarily be eliminated or even reduced if governments or aid agencies base their policies on doing so. This is my reply to the Fabian political philosophy implicit in the opening paragraph which asked whether satisfying basic needs is not an unquestionable priority for all policymakers.

Nevertheless, it would be mere pedantry to leave the matter ^{and} there -/typical academic over-simplification. For despite all this, it does not follow that the emphasis on basic needs should necessarily be opposed. To say - as one can say - that ^{it} is impossible to ^{identify or to} estimate ^{them} basic needs accurately, or to find out the number of people ^{defined by but not} not enjoying them, is not to deny that in

(1) Some will recall the resentment felt in Britain at the conditions which were attached to 'Marshall aid' after the war; much more recently, the central decisions of budgetary policy were in effect taken by the IMF: this also aroused some criticism.

As about from the political problems raised above,

certain contexts the approach may have worthwhile results. While its effects may be negligible or even negative, and are in any case unpredictable, they may also be positive. Some material inputs, especially food, are conditions ^{people} for/doing anything, even taking part in a ritual (and the reverse is not true). Moreover, the satisfaction of someone's material needs may help them struggle for greater equality in income, status, etc.

The approach provides yardsticks for assessing some of the effects of economic growth, and criticising those patterns of growth which leave social problems unsolved (or more severe).

→ After all, though an estimate that the proportion of the population living below a 'poverty line' is unchanged after a period of economic growth does not mean what it appears to mean, it is not totally lacking in meaning either. One would expect, for example, to find that key social indicators like infant mortality have not changed much. Moreover, if nutritional standards, etc, are monitored, this provides clues on the nature of the failures in social policy, especially inequalities in access to public services. Such critiques can be a source of public pressure for new policies and administrative reform.

In any case, some intervention is justified, on the above analysis, so far as at least one class of the poor is concerned. Children normally have no say in the pattern of household expenditure nor can they insist on their proper share of the household's food, yet they risk permanent physical or mental damage through undernourishment or neglect.

Whether such amelioration is possible depends on the particular political context. ~~E~~ven aid agencies may be able to contribute slightly to the relief of poverty, in some periods in some countries, especially small ones with low incomes. ~~E~~ And even to increase the milk consumption of one undernourished child by one litre per week for one year is not a negligible achievement. Selective intervention of this kind may be the best that can be achieved in the years (perhaps centuries) before basic needs in the full sense, material and otherwise, can be satisfied - if this will ever be possible.

But social scientists really concerned about basic needs are likely to make a greater contribution to satisfying them if they focus their attention less on generalisations about policy objectives and instruments and more on the forces in specific countries, including external influences, that prevent constructive policies being implemented, or even really tried, i.e. on why the poor remain poor there.