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# Basic Human Needs: Concept or Slogan, Synthesis or Smokescreen?

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*So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—twenty years largely wasted . . . Trying to learn to use words and every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure. Because one has only learnt to get the better of words. For the thing one is no longer disposed to say, or the way one is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate . . .*

T. S. Eliot<sup>1</sup>

## Great disorder under heaven

The emergence of Basic Human Needs/Basic Needs/Minimum Material Needs approaches to development cannot be understood in isolation. It is part of the intellectual history of the death of a paradigm. That paradigm equated development with maximum GDP growth and modernisation through maximum investment. Growthmanship and gap closing—in their western capitalist, European socialist, and related guises<sup>2</sup>—saw the future of the periphery in terms of the centre's past: history was to repeat itself neither as tragedy nor farce but as triumph.

By 1960 that paradigm was under serious attack; by 1970 it was on the verge of dissolution. Disorder was evident in the thought and action of most intellectuals and decision takers concerned with development. Frequent attempts were made either to shore up the paradigm or to create a substitute framework. A number of syntheses and new "single key element" approaches were floated with greater or less plausibility, rigour, applicability and support. It is in this setting and terminological confusion that Basic Human Needs (BHN) and its variants have emerged. The operational antecedents to BHN moreover have been national and the terminology is therefore related to those national contexts. China and Tanzania can hardly be expected to have fashioned uniform international terminologies for what are, in fact, national, political programmes. Equally, the diversity arising from the emphasis on worker and peasant perceptions and on indigenous

intellectual formulations inevitably leads to a lack of uniformity in basic needs terminology, even when the discussion is restricted to a single country.<sup>3</sup>

While a definitive exposition is not yet possible, this article attempts to sketch the main elements of a thorough-going Basic Human Needs strategy, to give a brief resume of the history of current BHN/BN debates and to consider certain elements of unity and diversity present in those debates.

## Basic Human Needs: concept and strategy<sup>4</sup>

As an organising concept for a development strategy, Basic Human Needs—as the name implies—is concerned with the primary needs of communities and individuals. It rejects the sacrifice of a minimum decent (socially determined) standard of life for workers and peasants, either to provide the 'incentive' for capitalist accumulation or the means to socialist reconstruction for the putative benefit of rather vaguely identified future generations. In rejecting the maximisation of the rate of growth of productive forces, it also denies the primacy of accumulation.

BHN as a strategy has five broad targets. It seeks to provide:

- basic consumer goods—food, clothing, housing, basic furnishings and other socially defined necessities (including, in China, a decent burial);
- universal access to basic services, e.g. primary and adult education, pure water, preventative and curative health programmes, habitat (environmental sanitation, urban and rural community infrastructure) and communications;
- the right to productive employment (including self-employment) yielding both high enough productivity and equitable enough remuneration to allow each household to meet its basic personal consumption out of its own income;
- an infrastructure capable of: producing the goods and services required (whether directly via domestic

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1 Possibly the quotation should be from 'Hamlet' or 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'—the problems of achieving a valid relationship between objective correlatives and concepts and of the two-way interaction between a new contribution and the previous body of thought are quite as real in development studies as in poetry. Unfortunately they are less often, less frequently, less explicitly and less effectively faced.

2 e.g. the Prebisch (Economic Commission for Latin America) and Mahalanobis (Indian marxian) schools of thought. Both are in part original and centred in non-European contexts but they accept unexamined the basic elements of the paradigm.

3 See, for example, *Towards a Socialist Sri Lanka* (Centre for Society and Religion 1977) and *Sri Lanka: An Experience in a Need-Oriented Development* (Marga Institute/International Fund for Development Alternatives, 1978). In this case the terminology also differs between the two analyses of the same context apparently independent of the difference in analysis and conclusion. (The first is 'revolutionary' and the second 'progressive': see above).

4 This section is largely a synthesis of the conceptual frames of *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs* (ILO, 1976); *What Now? Another Development* (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 1975); *Report of the Egham Meeting* (World Council of Churches Unit Justice and Service, 1977). The author is evidently not non-partisan as he took part in each of the three "source" groups.

production or indirectly through foreign trade); generating a surplus to finance basic communal services; providing investment sufficient to sustain the increases in productive forces needed to advance towards the fulfilment of BHN;

—mass participation in decision-taking and the implementation of projects.

The BHN strategy envisaged here is production oriented—transfer payments in the sense of secondary redistribution of consumption power are not central<sup>5</sup>. Its emphasis is on primary redistribution—of income, assets, power—because it views the separation of production and distribution as theoretically unsound and practically impossible. The need for productive employment is therefore both an end and a means and accumulation, while denied the status of an end, is seen as critical.

But BHN is not concerned with absolute poverty or minimum needs alone. Its stress on the social determination of needs implies that, as initial targets are approached, new ones will succeed them, and in this sense it is process-oriented. At least immediate BHN goals, therefore, differ sharply from state to state depending on historic, political, social and economic circumstances. Meeting initial BHN targets is infinitely more difficult technically, and *a fortiori* politically, with high degrees of inequality. In part however, the stress on equality depends on value judgements—radical inequality of *results* (not just of opportunity) is perceived as an evil.

Participation is a vital means to achieving these goods as well as an end in itself. The strategy does not propose marginal tinkering, but a form of liberation much closer to revolution—non-violent or otherwise. Consensus and mutual interest models of the state which deny class differences and the integral nature of struggle are rejected: there is no way the strategy can work without mass participation and control.

The BHN strategy taken as a whole is not materialistic: priority emphasis on a number of the basic goods and services mentioned are hard to justify on market force or socialist production grounds. Some (especially the material) components of a BHN strategy can be listed as global, universal needs: others are specific to time, community and place.

#### **Historical antecedents: intellectual and operational**

While the concept of Basic Human Needs was not invented by the consultants for the ILO's World Employment Conference, that occasion was one of

the first major forums at which it was discussed in its present form and its preparation—and especially the writing of *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs* (ILO, 1975)—brought a number of strands together. Like other concepts, it represents both a reordering of existing elements and the introduction of newer ones. The main influences behind the emergence of explicit BHN and BN discussions in 1975 include:<sup>6</sup>

—Indian work on basic and minimum needs during the 1960s, including work by K. N. Raj and B. Minhas. Much of this thinking was embodied in early drafts of the 5th Plan, and in related South Asian studies (for example, those of K. Griffin).

—The attempt to articulate a socialist economic and pricing calculus more relevant to a socialist society's aims. This is associated with the work of Kalecki and I. Sachs, and involved what Minhas has termed, in a slightly different context, the rejection of the Benthamite calculus (which is basically marginalist economics turned into a general social model).

—The "mass needs" debate (particularly in its Mahgrebin-Egyptian forms), particularly the examination of the limits of socio-economic reconstruction under Nasser and those imposed by the initial (Bettelheim) heavy industry centred Algerian strategy.

—Certain Latin American thinking arising from the limitations and failures as well as insights of ECLA's "gapmanship" model (Cardoso). The disaggregation of dependence models in order to study in detail their impact on exploited and excluded groups (Stavenhagen, Furtado) was also an important Latin American element.

—Interaction between the debate on the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and that on Self-Reliance. Especially relevant was the recognition that changes at international trade levels were meaningless without parallel national strategic changes being made both on the periphery and by stronger trade partners at the centre. Otherwise, the excluded, exploited and oppressed in the periphery would be unlikely to benefit from so-called gains achieved within the framework of NEIO.

—Reactions against the arguments in *Limits to Growth* that world resource constraints required continued inequality. Particularly important here was the work of the Bariloche Foundation on a Latin American model which sought to demonstrate the feasibility of meeting basic material needs in a reasonable time.

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<sup>5</sup> The counter view (e.g. Srinivason, 1977) is a clear misreading. Not simply the BHN analysts but equally the 1976 World Employment Conference *Declaration* (ILO, 1976) underscore raising productivity and production in ways achieving primary redistribution.

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<sup>6</sup> Concept dating is always difficult. *What Now?* (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1975) and *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs* (ILO, 1976) are taken as the first formulations of BHN/BN as a strategic concept but some earlier works also have claims to that status.

—The attempt by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) (and particularly by Maurice Strong) to develop an “inner limit” of minimum human needs as a co-constraint with the ecological “outer limit” in the development of environmental policy.<sup>7</sup>

—The World Bank’s (and particularly Robert McNamara’s) growing concern from 1969 onwards that the old development model excluded at least 40 per cent of the world’s population from its benefits. This concern had previously led to “absolute poverty eradication” and “redistribution with growth”.

—The International Labour Organisation’s World Employment Programme (ILO-WEP) and the conversion of those most concerned from strategies concerned with narrowly defined wage employment to those stressing full productive employment.

—A general revolt against intellectual over-centralism: both a “revolt of the periphery” against Eurocentric intellectual paradigms and a questioning of the ‘top down’ analyses made by central decision takers.

—The experience of several nations which did pursue strategies markedly unlike that of the dominant paradigm: China and Tanzania (BHN); Taiwan, South Korea (BN). Sri Lanka’s BN approach was a perplexing influence as it was basically non-participatory, only tenuously linked to primary (as opposed to secondary fiscal and subsidy) redistribution, and neither economically nor socially self-sustaining.<sup>8</sup>

Of these influences, the last is probably the most important. However, the UNEP-IBRD-ILO strands contributed much of the analysis leading up to the current BHN debate. Three influences, often asserted to have been critical, almost certainly were not; indeed, they were rejected by a majority of those involved at an early stage. These were:

—the European conceived African and Asian “community development” movement of the 1950-60s, seen as offending both against freedom (paternalism and Eurocentrism) and necessity (inadequate attention to the basic need of poor people to produce more).

—the social statistics movement—including “social cost/benefit” analysis—seen as economic, always in danger of “black boxing” experts’ values as truth and ignoring needs as perceived by workers and

peasants, and likely to serve as a substitute or excuse for not acting in respect of visible needs. This can be seen in part as a Third World revolt against Western intellectual hegemony, and in part as a practitioner reaction against arid formalism.

—the most austere “alternative life-style”, “zero growth” forms of First World environmentalism, seen as relating to totally different objective conditions and as embodying values (e.g. austerity for its own sake) the Third World did not share.

### Elements of unity and diversity

The strategic model as outlined above is clearly not accepted in full by all who support BN or BHN. Some elements unify the disparate proponents of BHN/BN, and some issues clearly divide them. The death of the old paradigm has—predictably—been the occasion for a highly unstable situation in which new concepts are very rapidly projected and often as rapidly dropped. There persists a facile hope of finding ‘the answer’ and an easy short term one at that. There have also been some ‘mergers’ with strands of analysis and action previously isolated or insulated from political economic strategic debate. These include the bodies related to the International Council of Adult Education, and Christian bodies concerned with distributive justice, particularly the World Council of Churches.<sup>9</sup> What effects or final synthesis will emerge from these alliances is unclear. A number of advocates appear to have seen BHN as a convenient context in which to promote their own long standing preoccupations. Many community development advocates, some social statisticians, some model builders, certain international agencies (but not the ILO, UNEP or IBRD, whose involvement—however evaluated—is both of longer standing and more basic) and a bevy of ‘developmentalists’ and ‘poverty specialists’ appear to fall in this camp.

The perception of BN as a means of stabilizing and reducing tensions in order to avert more basic change (a group in which many would place the World Bank) is very influential. Not unrelated are the aid agencies who use BHN or BN to justify “Aid for the Poorest” or similar proposals. BHN does not reject aid: in principle, it sees it as recompense for continued unequal transactions and structures. Like NIEO, however, the BHN strategic formulation treats aid as a transitional element.

There are also those who advocate policies and strategies based on a new international economic order, but one in which Basic Human Needs are integrated.<sup>10</sup> The objection here is that the internal

7 *What Now?* grew out of an initial UNEP request that the Hammaraskjold Foundation do a global minimum needs study (See also Mathews, 1977).

8 cf sources cited at Note 4. This perplexity of perception is shared by many Sri Lankan participants and analysts (BHN/BN or otherwise).

9 e.g. December 1976 issue of *Convergence*; Green, 1977; Egham Report, WCC, 1977; Ecumenical Institute, 1976.

10 See e.g. *Reshaping the International Order* (RIO) (Tinbergen, 1976). For a fuller review see Green, 1977A.

upheaval—both political and economic—demanded by the implementation of BHN policies is restricted to poor countries. Further, it is to be imposed by the centre on the periphery rather than involving *global* distributive justice. Given the centre's lack of credibility as an advocate of implementing BHN—either on the periphery or, in many cases, at home—this recommendation has created suspicion, anger and in some cases fear that BHN/BN has become a rich country manoeuvre to prevent radical change on the periphery.

There is doubtless a general concern with personal consumption goods and basic services. However, several groups of BN (and some BHN) advocates would prefer to see this as one element in a differently conceived strategy. For example, Minhas sees public service programme packages as enabling the most deprived groups to become productive enough to attain minimum income standards.

A clear division exists on basic versus minimum needs. The earlier advocates of absolute poverty eradication and of a human environmental minimum, e.g. IBRD and UNEP respectively, tend to stress minimum, and often minimum material, needs. So do certain aid agencies and some Third World proponents who view meeting minimum requirements as so difficult that anything further is diversionary.

Another split is that between Basic Human Needs and Basic Needs: this is not merely a quibble over words. The BN formulations do not make participation integral; indeed, they have a distinct tendency to erect Platonic Guardians (states, leaders, the IBRD, the revolutionary vanguard). Nor do they lay much stress on productive employment as a means of creating a production relations and power base to sustain the strategy. The BHN advocates, however, see participation and productive employment as vital means as well as integral ends.

While there is agreement in rejecting much of the statistical apparatus and ideology built around the old paradigm, there is total disarray on what is needed for BHN or BN. At one extreme are the proponents of an equally abstract, universalised set of prescriptive needs at global level with highly subjective measures of their fulfilment. At the other are those who note that countries in which BN or BHN strategies are at least partially operative—e.g. China, Tanzania, Somalia, Vietnam, Mozambique—are not very prone to statistical sophistication. They have elaborated their statistical requirements in the course of implementation, not as a precondition to determining needs or setting strategic targets. From this record one conclusion is that “poverty mapping” is in practice an alternative to, not a means toward, either BHN or BN, just as in the 1950s and 1960s

much Plan writing was an alternative to creating a serious planning process. Almost all intermediate positions also have their advocates. In general, Third World and decision-taking participants in the dialogue tend toward the “act first and find out data needs as we go along” approach: First World, academic, and international agency participants prefer detailed prior mapping.

Another split is on whether BHN/BN is relevant to global inequality and to ‘rich’ country development. Clearly the logic of a BHN strategy at global level—while not centering on “gapmanship”—does imply ceilings on inequality among countries in the use of scarce resources. This implication is rarely articulated—presumably for tactical reasons. BN has much weaker implications on this front: it can hardly be seen as a strategic organising concept for rich countries as BHN can be. However, BHN articulation for states with high levels of productive forces is virtually non-existent: while some formulations may see Sweden as a high income state with a quasi-BHN approach this is neither spelled out nor shared by most participants.

At the moment those who assert their advocacy of BHN and/or BN span a very wide gamut of classifications on either political, economic, ideological, or analytical criteria. Presumably this will not endure. However, to date three groups—conservative, progressive/radical and revolutionary—have emerged.

**Conservative** (or capitalist) advocates and analysts are usually Basic or Minimum Needs proponents. On the whole they do not see participation as an end (as opposed to a means or manipulative device) nor do they interpret full productive employment in terms of power or production relations. Equally, their allocation analyses rarely see strategy alterations as releasing or mobilising a significant volume of previously unusable resources.

The most extreme of this group can be termed Friedmanite—after all Friedman's minimum income and negative income tax arguments are minimum material needs ones, and he believes that *laissez faire* plus minimum income guarantees are most beneficial to the poor. The 1976 Turner Report on incomes policy in Tanzania (not very representative of general ILO positions) and some World Bank country reports (not necessarily representative) can be seen in this context.

Basic (or minimum) needs models based, whether implicitly or explicitly, on Taiwan and South Korea, represent a more mainstream conservative BN variant. The WEP's (pre BHN) Philippine Employment Mission Report is an example as, in many respects, are President McNamara's 1969-77 Annual Bank Board of Governor's Speeches. So too, in

practice, are most aid agency BN programmes (Sweden, Norway and probably the Netherlands are exceptions which fall into the next group).

**Progressive/radical** (social democratic) analyses normally include participation and the political/power aspects of productive employment. Exceptions are the strategic component (as opposed to strategy) BN packages which are usually related to strategies in one way or another encompassing these elements, as in the draft Indian Fifth Plan. The Christian component also falls largely into this group, at least as far as reports or institutionally published papers are concerned (e.g. World Council of Churches, 1977; Riddell, 1977).

Mainstream ILO work—especially the WEP report, *Meeting Basic Needs*—is squarely in this group. It too shows signs of toning down more radical or revolutionary contributions, but the trend here appears to be toward the progressive/conservative frontier not the radical/revolutionary one.

The **revolutionary** (transition to socialism) analysts and advocates are often difficult to distinguish from the radical end of the progressive/radical grouping. This arises from a desire to relate to broader groups of decision takers than would accept a transition to socialism approach, or to a wider range of contexts than those in which a revolutionary strategy is attainable, and also from the fact that a BHN strategy is usually perceived as less directly linked to

revolutionary tactics than to what is built after the formal capture of power.

The clearest revolutionary cases are national—e.g. China, Vietnam, Mozambique, Tanzania,<sup>11</sup> probably Somalia and Algeria from 1975, probably Chile during the Unidad Popular government—and a high proportion of the writing is either official or quasi-official. Much is very country specific and uses terminology unique to that state. A fairly high proportion is operational to a degree that makes the separation of tactics and sequences from goals and priorities very difficult.

**Pragmatic** has not been listed as a cluster. In general pragmatism—as used to classify decision takers, advocates and social analysts—is a description of tactics not of ends. Minimum needs may be a tactic of a pragmatic conservative and initial advocacy of a progressive BN or BHN stance of a pragmatic revolutionary. When such tactics are appropriate is a valid question, but one answerable only once one knows both basic values of the actual or potential user and the context in which the tactics are to be applied. In that sense the tactical approaches of Chairman Mao were quite as pragmatic as they were revolutionary.

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<sup>11</sup> See *The Arusha Declaration Ten Years After* (Nyerere, 1977) for a detailed analytical and critical survey of the results of the first decade of Tanzania's strategy centred on self reliance, transition to socialism, reduction of inequality, eradication of exploitation. See also Green, 1977B.

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