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FOREWORD to Theology of Development.pdf

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Africa is often portrayed, and seen, as the pariah of the world. A vast, diverse region comprising over 50 states, a good number of who continue to exhibit a balkanizing trend, it has occupied the lowest storey in the skyscraper of development. The statistics, tallied painstakingly by the World Bank in its annual *World Development Report*, are all there to prove it: lowest levels of per capita incomes, life expectancy, internet penetration, literacy, health care access, and industrialization. At the same time, Africa has the highest poverty levels, rate of population growth, and overall mortality. The era of great expectations witnessed at the time of independence from colonial rule has over the last 50 years morphed into one of great disappointment.

Only recently has optimism resurfaced with the so-called second liberation of the continent from the manacles of authoritarianism, but any positive feelings are fast disappearing given the emergent political culture of regime change through mass protests instigated through social media. These raise the specter of reverse political development; instead of evolving a system of power transfer that is systematic, constitutional and orderly, Africans appear to embrace social chaos as a mechanism for political change. While this trend has been largely been witnessed in North Africa starting in 2010, there are indications that the disease might reach sub-Saharan Africa and even beyond.

The consequences of this trend to the whole question of African development are enormous. For one, no country or region can ever develop amidst chaos and general social instability. If North Africa’s Arab Spring is any pointer to the future, Africans appear to be destined to an era where myriad achievements of development are destroyed in a moment of temporary social insanity when congregating mobs of urban suicidal, bandana-wearing braves in jeans toss Molotov cocktails at edifices that have taken decades to build. They then sling their guns, march to State House and kill the president, perhaps to prove the mute point that a free people can humiliates and kill their leader. Given that social protests, where they have occurred in Western nations, do not degenerate into full-fledged gun wars and violent ouster of political leaders, we must conclude that it takes a particular kind of people to do this. Herein lies the malaise of the continent; a sick population that neither knows its objective interests nor cares to know.

This raises an important question about development, for development is not just limited to construction of physical infrastructure. It is about people; their cultural and political development. In the past, scholars have tended to look at development purely as economic growth (Solow, 1956; Myrdal, 1957; Mankiw, et al, 1992; De Soto 2001). It was Sen (1999) who really put human beings at the centre of development. He saw development as a matter of people, as being involved in the provision of individuals with the appropriate context to exercise ‘their reasoned agency.’ Sen conceived of development as individual freedom from, among others, poverty, tyranny and intolerance.

The emphasis on freedom for freedom’s sake – which Sen does not advocate – is now all the range, and freedom is the word on everyone’s lips.
Unfortunately, there are no countervailing admonitions against absolutism. The obtaining laissez-faire clamour for limitless freedom obviates the need for personal restraint that is requisite for the enjoyment of the same freedom by others. Freedom, after all, is supposed to result in “reasoned agency”, a kind of appreciation that our individual and collective choices can result in both positive and negative consequences, some intended, others not.

This is an important point for development practitioners. If the world is to attain the Millennium Development Goals and ultimately eradicate poverty, it must successfully confront the challenge of how to reign in the destructive exercise of individual choice occasioned by the new era of unprecedented freedom and postmodernism. It is not just enough to say that freedom to make bad choices is a manifestation of the existence of freedom. It smacks of a kind of abdication of responsibility to insist on freedom of choice while taking all choice options to be good and equal in worth. There is also an assumption, inherent in such a position, that all human beings, albeit created equal, are endowed equally mentally, physically, and even culturally. Human development should not be defined narrowly as allowing people to lead the kind of lives they choose and providing them with the tools and opportunities they need to make that choice. Some human beings could, after all, chose to spend their entire time watching pornographic movies or playing video games – if we have provided them with freedom to so choose and adequate consumer electronics and associated networked facilities!

The key word here is appropriate context for humans to engage productively with beneficial development. The question is: what is this appropriate context and how do we bring it about? Firstly, we need to think of this context as larger than a set of laws and regulations that make a particular state capitalist-capable. There is a moral dimension to the whole question of development considering that we often talk of “sustainable development.” For development to be sustainable, we have to think of it in terms larger than our individual selves. We have to think of development in relation to our neighbors, our common planet, our past and our future. We must, therefore, see development as a complex issue that needs to be discussed using many perspectives and approaches.

Dr Bundi’s book proposes that there is a place of theology in development work. The book sees development as the release (to make free) of God-given potential of individuals and peoples. As a systematic discourse about God, the creator of all there is, theology concerns itself with how religion most efficiently and effectively expresses and communicates faith. This expression takes place in the context of the community. Theology, therefore, has the potential to aid in the identification and articulation of community goals and objectives, to reinforce them, and to mobilize members of the community towards the attainment of such goals, including development. As a historically and culturally conditioned system of belief, theology is part and parcel of culture. This cultural and historical specificity imbues theology with immense potentialities particularly with regard to community participation that is often crucial to the sustainability of development projects. It is this cultural context of development that Kenya’s
Vision 2030, the country’s development blueprint covering the period 2008 to 2030, acknowledges by identifying the “social” as a key anchor or pillar of development, the others being economic and political pillars.

The long and short of it is that development is multifaceted endeavor. Every discipline and school of thought must make its contribution. This little book is an important addition to the contribution of theology to the development discourse. I highly recommend it all development practitioners.

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References


