

Claudio D'Amato

Communities, capabilities, and service-oriented humanitarian ethics

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Humanitarians have always had to negotiate between their ethical principles and those of the political sovereignties in which they operate. Seemingly neutral actions like providing healthcare or sheltering refugees often present deep moral conflicts. Donors' agendas may be at odds with the beliefs of their aid recipients; aid workers may misunderstand local politics and become unwitting allies in genocidal campaigns, as in Rwanda; and US-based transnational corporations may use NGOs to increase developing nations' reliance on neoliberal business models that subjugate them. Some humanitarians react to these challenges by attempting to remain apolitical in the name of neutrality, while others posit specific ethical-political agendas, often in the name of "peace-building" or "development."

I argue that development workers are best equipped to deal with these challenges when their projects are designed after a communal version of Amartya Sen's capability approach to justice. I suggest that capability-based NGOs should prioritize the ethical and political self-determinations of their target communities, effectively conceptualizing themselves and their money as servants and not as leaders or liberators. This proposal follows a shift in some recent capability theorizing from the more liberal and democratizing versions of the approach (which define development as abundance of individual freedom for all persons) to the more collectivist and communitarian versions (which understand development to be whatever its beneficiaries say that it is). Unlike other accounts of development, which claim to be "neutral" but instead rely on various liberal, neoliberal, or Marxist assumptions, this proposal acknowledges its own politicization. It aims to deemphasize the importance of democratic liberalism for the capability approach in favor of an ethic of service based on particularist and localized conceptions of morality and capability.

In the first section of this paper I review how development work relates to the international aid industry as a whole, and I defend a definition of "development" as a long-term and politically engaged type of humanitarian action. In the second section I argue that development should be further defined as an increase in the quality and availability of basic human capabilities, and I present a communal version of Sen's capability approach to justice. Finally, in the third section I discuss how this novel version of the approach justifies the endorsement of a humanitarian ethic of service with regard to development.

I. The concept of development

The international aid system comprises many kinds of intervention: short-term or long-term, neutral or politically engaged, nongovernmental or state-sponsored, financed privately or with public money, and so on. Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein (2011) identify "humanitarianism" and "development" as the two major areas of current foreign and international aid: the former "emphasizes the physical (and increasingly the psychological) condition of suffering people above all else," while the latter seeks to improve the general "human good through an imagined future" (5). Alternatively, they say, "we might divide the aid world by professional expertise,

noting that economists long played a lead role in development, that lawyers established a subspecialty in human rights, and that doctors and nurses have deep ties to humanitarianism” (Redfield & Bornstein 2011: 5-6). So humanitarians care the most about ending suffering, while the endgame of development is the attainment of long-lasting and sustainable justice. Surely the two converge in important ways. The ultimate goal of development may be to reduce suffering in the long run, and humanitarians may see the alleviation of suffering as one way to till the soil for justice to grow in the future, so this distinction is a matter of emphasis rather than nature.

A less crude partitioning of the global aid space pays closer attention to the ethical, political, and ideological commitments of aid work, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Michael Barnett and Jack Snyder (2008) arrange humanitarian action in four categories based on whether it is intended to be political or apolitical and whether it has modest or ambitious aims, ranging from “bed for the night” (unqualified short-term emergency relief in life-threatening circumstances) to “peacebuilding” (eliminating the root causes of conflict to promote a stable and peaceful political and economic system). Similarly, Craig Calhoun (2008) distinguishes two major approaches: the minimalist “simple charity” that provides aid if and as needed and the maximalist “pre-political charity” that focuses on improving human lives in order to avoid crises in the first place. Thomas Weiss (1999) proposes a broader spectrum according to the nature and degree of humanitarians’ involvement in four areas: impartiality among aid recipients, consent of aid recipients, neutrality with respect to existing sides, and engagement with local political systems. Individually or taken together, these divisions of the aid space supposedly encompass the entirety of aid work, ranging from a classic method that mandates relief without entanglement to a solidarity-based approach that recommends a fuller participation.

At the same time, aid work can be categorized not only for its quantitative involvement with power structures, but also on the qualitative content of its preexisting ideological commitments. According to ALNAP (a watchdog NGO comprising representatives from all constituent areas of the humanitarian sector), some actors are “concerned with reaffirming and strengthening the core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, while others are urging diversification and inclusion of different moral frameworks from which to pursue humanitarian action, such as local religious and cultural values, or broader peacebuilding goals” (108). These “core humanitarian principles” are the old Red Cross values that have remained popular since the nineteenth century (Barnett & Weiss 2008; Allié 2011). Those who urge diversification, as I do, worry that since most current international aid is financed by donors based in the Global North, and since it stands under the legal and often military protection of the United Nations, it risks being what the HPG calls “a vector of values and interests that are not universally shared in the places where [aid] intervenes” (Collinson & Elhawary 2012).

Where does development fall on this complex and multifaceted continuum? Calhoun uses the term *development* to identify the more directly engaged approaches. Weiss, Barnett, and Snyder do not use it at all, but their concepts of solidarity and peacebuilding as the most engaged come fairly close. The engagement being discussed here is political, not practical: development work is in fact less directly involved “on the ground,” even as it reaches deeper into the sociopolitical realms of a society (Rubenstein 2015: 22-25). Gilbert Rist’s popular definition of development captures this spirit well. He defines development as “a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require . . . the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations [and aim to] increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand” (1997: 13). On this view, to “do” development means to destroy social relations and the environment, for destruction of

what is already there is a first step toward the creation of what will be there (Rist 1997: 21-4). It also means to have specific goals in mind, such as an endpoint or ideal outcome: even though all aid work is goal-oriented, development is teleological in a unique way, because it envisions a self-sustaining future characterized by something like stable justice or peace. If so, then it is no surprise when development projects are ideologically laden and prescribe specific ethical and political choices, or that development workers should be fluent in the language of human rights, as they often are. Many contemporary authors do in fact envision development in this way. For example, Judith Blau et al. (2009) measure development through dozens of subjectively selected indicators, the Decent Society Index, including democracy, equality, voting rights, and cultural pluralism. Likewise, Amartya Sen (1988) argues that development should be equated with the actual wellbeing of persons and not so much with the economic growth of a country. As I said, Sen's concept of development is the focus of the next section.

The take-home point from the discussion so far should be that while certain humanitarian interventions are relatively uninvolved with the sociopolitical lives of their recipients, the same does not seem possible for development work, which is a kind of intervention seeking to produce lasting change in a society's sociopolitical realm. Development work must be extremely sensitive to the ideological commitments of both its proponents and its recipients, which is why it is vital that its underlying theoretical framework be in perfect working order.

II. The capability approach to development

In "The Concept of Development" (1988) Sen defines 'development' as significant increases in people's wellbeing and actual quality of life. Traditional wellbeing indicators—GDP, GNP, productivity, industrialization, mortality, fertility, etc.—say little about the actual distribution of resources or the different abilities of people to convert resources into a better quality of life. Thus, Sen argues, our assessment of a society's development ought not to correspond with its economic growth, but with the actual welfare of its citizens. This wellbeing is not to be measured in outcomes (again such as wealth), but in capability, namely their free agency, their actual free opportunity to make choices to direct the course of their own lives without undue hindrance or fear of repression or persecution. Thus, for Sen, a well-developed society is one where as many people as possible have a high wellbeing measurable in terms of capability. In turn, 'capability' is defined as the set of all functionings or life paths (goals, ambitions, needs, wills, desires, etc.) that are freely and realistically available to a person. Capability is a person's actually existing, reliably available, and safely exercisable freedom to make choices about the direction of her life. This definition needs some unpacking, as capability thus stated can be mistaken for opportunity, agency, or even a basic human right to unimpeded free choice. While it does have something in common with those ideas, the concept of capability stands apart in significant ways.

For one, capability entails **the ability to live**: a person has a higher capability the more he is physically and psychologically able to live long and well. Food and water insecurity obviously detracts from capability, as do physical and mental disabilities. Other negative influences include a short life expectancy, a high infant mortality rate in one's society, being the object of social or political persecution, living in a war zone, having a genetic predisposition to disease within one's population, and many more. Secure and long-lasting health is a critical prerequisite of capability, for without it all else becomes harder or impossible.

Second, capability entails **the freedom to self-determine life paths**: a person has a higher capability the more he is actually and meaningfully free to choose for himself what his life will be like. At a minimum, this freedom has to be guaranteed legally, such as when it is enshrined in a constitutional document, but it has to be actual and not only nominal. For example, a person whose caste or family lives in subservience to another is less meaningfully free than a person in a casteless society, and thus has a lower capability (on account of social status, if nothing else). In the ideal situation, a person is both legally and actually free to choose among life paths without fear of repression or persecution from the state or society.

Third, capability entails **the actual and realistic availability of life paths**: a person has a higher capability the more life paths he can actually choose from and the more varied they are. It is not enough to guarantee that people be able to choose if there is little they can choose from. A person born in extreme poverty “can” choose whether to die or continue struggling, or whether to starve or emigrate or turn to crime; or a woman in a repressive patriarchal society “can” choose to submit or be persecuted. But these choices are not good enough: a variety of life paths must be actually available for people to choose from. Moreover, these must be realistically available and not only on paper, without requiring exceptional luck, superhuman sacrifice, or placing oneself in mortal danger in order to be attained. For example, the life path of emigrating to Europe or to America to build a better life for one’s family is nominally available to everyone everywhere, but realistically available only to certain citizens of certain countries.

Notice that wealth still plays a role on this account of development, if for no other reason than in order to achieve sufficient capability one must have reasonable access to water, food, shelter, and sanitation, and money is instrumental in procuring those. But wealth is not as relevant in a society without structures that allow citizens to convert it into wellbeing safely and reliably, so it is not the main object of the approach. Notice, further, that the requirement that many and varied life paths be available does not by itself recommend any one lifestyle over any other. This is a sensible worry because the capability-based concept of development may be seen as suggesting a pluralistic lifestyle in the tradition of Western capitalism, which would be a cultural imperialism of sorts, but this need not be the case. Which life paths ought to be available depends on what people actually want according to their existing cultures and traditions. A society where people can realistically become astronauts may be more technologically advanced than one without a space program, but not more developed (in the same way that a human being is more complex than a salamander, but not more evolved). Whatever the standards may be for the realization of life paths, those paths must be realistically available and social institutions must be designed to facilitate their achievement. On this view, not all industrialized capitalist societies are necessarily well-developed and some economies that rely on subsistence farming may well be. So the central desideratum remains unchanged even as the contingent circumstances of its instantiation change. In short: the requirement of many and varied life paths should not be mistaken for the argument that “simpler equals less developed.” That is exactly the mindset that a capability-based account of development seeks to oppose.

The upshot of this approach is that because development *just is* the widespread presence of capability, development humanitarians should work in the direction of increasing the capability of the people in their recipient population. The resulting process is obviously political, because all the features of capability just outlined require various kinds of socioeconomic transformation. In fact, development-as-capability is political in both ways discussed in the first section: it is quantitatively politically engaged in the power structures of its target localities and it is also qualitatively ideologically non-neutral. In my view, it is this latter feature that creates a problem

for the approach, not because development work should be ideologically neutral, but because the specific non-neutrality that Sen advocates (democratic liberalism) is problematic. I illustrate why that is so in the next section.

III. A communal capability approach

So far we have seen how, for Sen, development is capability and capability is freedom. But whose freedom is that exactly and whose capability should be increased? Sen thinks of freedom as limited to individuals, even if influenced by collectives. In keeping with the liberal tradition, the individual person is the locus of moral importance and the possessor of a special agency, the capacity to act and choose. But as people do not live in a vacuum, their individual agencies are continuously negotiated within their social environments. In Sen's words from *Development as Freedom* (1999):

There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom. To counter the problems that we face, we have to see individual freedom as a social commitment. (1999: xii)

By “social commitment” Sen means that the discovery, protection, and increase of capability is a communal exercise to be performed by collectives, not an individual one that can be conducted in the privacy of one's own mind. The ultimate goal is to reach something like a consensus on what capability means in this particular society and how it can be increased for these particular people; and a consensus of this kind is to be reached through “public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance” (Sen 1999: 76-81).

This emphasis on individual freedom and democratic deliberation is hardly surprising given Sen's intellectual inheritance,¹ but it is troubling from a non-Western perspective—not because non-Westerners hate personal freedom and are inherently undemocratic, but because these ideas are historically and currently not prioritized in many countries across the globe.² A concept of development that emphasizes them as heavily as Sen's does would either be unpopular or require forceful imposition in order to work, which defies the very purpose of the capability approach. This worry may be allayed by deemphasizing the approach's reliance on individual freedom and democratic deliberation, seeking instead to increase capability without imposing these values. Development would remain political, of course, but only in the sense of politically engaged and no longer in the sense of ideologically non-neutral. Development-as-capability does not *require* an ideological commitment to democratic liberalism, even if it has almost always been proposed in that way. Conversely, I think it would work just as well with a more distinctly communitarian ethic. Development work may increase capability in whatever way its recipients determine on their own accord, not seeking to design an ideal society but merely assisting in providing the services that are desired and requested to deliver the capabilities that are internally chosen as the most important ones—even if these should not include equal freedoms, value everyone's agency in the same way, or hold a democratic political process in high regard.

¹ Other prominent capability theorists have argued along similar lines, such as Nussbaum (1997) and Alkire (2002).

² For a good discussion of the so-called “Asian values” in a contemporary context, see Taylor (2008).

A shift in the capability literature in the direction of communal thinking has already taken place in the last decade. The objection that Sen did not give collectives or communities their due respect has grown in popularity, and I believe this is symptomatic of a sufficiently widespread discontent with the approach's methodological and ethical individualism—though none of the authors that I survey here go as far as I do in amending the approach as a whole. For example, Frances Stewart (2005) argues that “social groups” are essential to the origination and sustenance of capabilities for their members. Group membership may increase people's capabilities in many ways, such as if being part of a thriving group improves their wellbeing or if a thriving group is instrumental in their attainment of capabilities. For these reasons, Stewart believes, capability theorists should have reason to find groups valuable beyond their mere instrumentality to the procurement of individual capabilities:

Assume we know what valuable and non-valuable capabilities are. Then we can look at group influences (and groups themselves) in the light of whether they promote values/preferences among individuals leading to the promotion of valuable capabilities or support choices favouring non-valuable ‘bad’ ones. In a simplistic way, we can then differentiate between good and bad groups according to which type of values they promote. (2005: 190)

In other words, a reliable way to achieve capabilities is to support the groups that promote them and oppose those that do not, quite regardless of which capabilities people find valuable or which groups they find “good.” Of course, criteria for distinguishing the valuable from the nonvaluable capabilities must be defended by separate arguments, but that is not the business of the proponent of the capability approach or the development worker. The point is merely that whatever those criteria may be, the approach has reason to focus on the groups that are conducive to the valuable capabilities that result from them. Similarly to Stewart, Séverine Deneulin (2006; 2008) argues that humans typically coexist in what Paul Ricoeur (1992) calls “structures of living together” (SLTs), the sum total of our social, cultural, and political arrangements, the collective milieus in which we live out our lives. Clearly, the quality of SLTs is key to the attainment of individual capabilities. Certain SLTs “can have a negative effect upon the good living of [their] members, such as structures of inequalities and oppression caused by an unequal distribution of power”; or they may explain “the successes and failures of countries to promote the capabilities that [their] people have reason to value” (Deneulin 2008: 111-112).

In a way, Sen already agrees with these arguments. As I explained, even on his version of the approach collectives play important roles in determining capabilities and evaluating why they are worth pursuing. But he seems to believe that this is all there is to Deneulin's criticism, that she is misunderstanding his argument only to suggest a similar one. In *The Idea of Justice* (2009) he refutes her objection that the capability approach suffers from methodological individualism, the idea that personal agency is or should be detached from the social influences around it:

the capability approach not only does not assume such detachment, its concern with people's ability to live the kind of lives they have reason to value brings in social influences both in terms of what they value (for example, ‘taking part in the life of the community’) and what influences operate on their values (for example, the relevance of public reasoning in individual assessment). . . . the misconception in this critique arises from its unwillingness to distinguish adequately between the individual characteristics that are used in the capability approach and the social influences that operate on them. (Sen 2009: 244-245)

But there is much more to the communal objection than Sen appreciates. For one, he overlooks Deneulin's argument that collectives are inherently morally valuable, not merely instrumentally useful to the deliverance and evaluation of individual capabilities. SLTs constitute the collective capability of a group, collective, community, or society. They embody its socio-historical agency, moral character, traditions, and culture above and beyond the preferences of its constituents. For that reason, Deneulin thinks that SLTs are a *precondition* of people's individual capabilities. The latter do matter, but they simply would not exist without the collective capabilities of the groups of which those individuals are members. As such, SLTs ought to be primary analytical subjects of inquiry for the capability approach at least as much as individuals are, if not more so. Then it remains true that certain collectives are better conducive to capabilities than others: Sen does not deny this (indeed, that claim is central to his account and justifies his endorsement of democratic deliberation as a principal means of capability evaluation), but neither does Deneulin present it as a novel idea. Rather, her point is that the collectives that do make it more likely for individuals to increase their own capabilities are themselves inherently valuable and ought to be primary subjects of the approach.

Likewise, Sen fails to give proper due to Deneulin's claim that SLTs are also a precondition of our choices of ethical values and principles. Even if we believe in the existence of universal values or absolute moral rules, rarely do the principles by which we live out our lives arise in the abstract or take universal form. Our social identity and the power structures that affect us always influence our ethical determinations, regardless of whether we believe them to be independent or freely chosen (Deneulin 2008: 115-117). It is especially surprising that Sen never addresses these points, as he seems to believe that the formation of ethical preferences happens primarily through social interaction.³ Moreover, notice how Deneulin uses the word 'precondition' in what I believe to be two different senses in the cases just explained. SLTs are a precondition of our individual capabilities in the sense that they are *circumstances necessary for* capabilities to emerge at all: this is a political claim that explains how people's capabilities derive from the social structures that affect them. On the other hand, saying that SLTs are a precondition of our values means that they are *prior* to values, in the sense that they influence and justify the values and principles that we hold as individuals. This is an ethical and epistemological claim, which I believe commits (or should commit) the capability approach to a more strongly communal conception of the Good—i.e., a communitarian ethic. Deneulin does not go as far as arguing for that view, but I do.

The capability approach in all its forms is inherently *moral*, meaning that it makes normative recommendations about (among many other things) which ethical values are important, which principles are worth striving for, and what it means to live a "Good Life" more generally. This is why Sen posits freedom of choice as a basic human good and other theorists define capability in terms of virtue ethics (e.g., Nussbaum 1997). But there are many rival conceptions of the Good, and some of them place a much higher premium on the communal determinations of collectives. A communitarian ethic posits that our values and principles are heavily influenced by our social environments, which of course does not mean that they are socially *defined* in a deterministic manner, nor that individual differences become irrelevant. But this ethic gives proper relevance

³ For example: "The exercise of freedom is mediated by [moral] values, but the values in turn are influenced by public discussions and social interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms" (1999: 9). Or: "Preference formation through social interaction is a major subject of interest in this study" (1999: 257). And again: "the significance of norms and values in behavior patterns that may be crucial for the making of public policy. The illustrations [just presented] also serve to outline the role of public interaction in the formation of values and ideas of justice" (1999: 280).

to how our values and principles are influenced by each of the many collectives within society to which we belong.

Communitarian critics of liberalism have always defended some version of a communitarian ethic. Most influential communitarian thinkers of the last two decades identify morality as rooted in the various collectives of which we are members, even as they do not deny that some general or universal principles may exist. For example, Michael Walzer (1994) conceives of morality as “thick from the beginning,” meaning that the content and expression of our values is localized and particularistic in the first instance: whatever “thin” or general commonalities we may find among people’s values across the world are the result of post-facto observation, not of the ethical or epistemic priority of universal principles. That is to say, whatever minimal general morality may exist is not freestanding and not prior to its particularistic counterparts—a moral Esperanto, as it were, created to appeal to the existing languages but not itself prior to them (Walzer 1994: 6-11). Likewise, Amitai Etzioni (2005) finds that special moral obligations within a community are justified even when they are not universalizable to members of other communities; and while special duties need not conflict with non-communitarian ethics, Etzioni argues along these lines because he believes that the community is where morality comes from in the first place, what he calls our primary moral ecology (22-25). That being said, neither Walzer nor Etzioni believes that communities should have the final say on all moral questions. For Walzer there are minimal standards that should not be violated, like protections against slavery and genocide; for Etzioni moral obligations toward “bad” communities still do not override general duties toward basic decency; or, as per Philip Selznick, communitarians “believe in rights-protection without rights-centeredness” (2002: 73), meaning that some values may be worth pursuing and protecting even if they do not need to be elevated to the status of universal human rights.

Importantly to the capability approach, communitarians also feel similarly about individual agency, for they respect it but without fetishizing it. They do not assume that equal and equally free agency is given to a person merely by virtue of his existing. Agency must be discovered and developed while people are part of a community, where they negotiate their respective agencies with those of other people and with the customs, values, and traditions of the collectives that they belong to. Both classic and contemporary communitarians support this view, for example when they argue that free choice does not exist aside from the ties of community that are antecedent to it (Sandel 1984: 86-87); or when they caution against the “lure of absolutes” with regard to moral agency and political freedom, insisting that these need to be evaluated within their contingent localities (Selznick 2002: 73-78). Deneulin herself supports this idea, arguing that “agency is not a tabula rasa, but is itself the product of certain SLTs” (2008: 119). Again, the communitarian argument is not that individual agency is irrelevant—just as liberals do not believe that it should be unlimited—but that it is insolubly tangled with the social circumstances of its discovery and exercise, and thus that it need not have pride of place.

This survey of communitarian ethics is necessarily brief and incomplete, but it is sufficient to make my point: that our values and principles are influenced strongly enough by our collective social groupings that it makes good sense to speak of them as “belonging to” or “characterizing” a certain society or collective. And since these values are used to assess which capabilities are worth pursuing, the values of a collective go a long way toward deciding which capabilities their members ought to have and why. This is a stark departure from Sen’s approach, because while he too recognizes the value of collectives in assessing and valuating capabilities, he does so mostly through democratic deliberation and always with the final goal of individual capabilities in mind. But a communal approach takes these claims more seriously. If collectives influence our

values and principles in indispensable ways, and if our values and principles help us choose and evaluate individual capabilities, it follows that collectives ought to be primary analytical subjects of the capability approach.

IV. The service ethic of development

A proper appreciation of the importance of a communitarian ethic constitutes a strong reason why the capability approach should address itself primarily to collectives instead of individuals. Recall that the approach is used both as a measure of existing socioeconomic conditions and as a set of theoretical parameters for new development work to follow. Sen himself has often spoken of the approach in these terms (1988; 2005; 2009), and a vast literature exists on how it can be operationalized and quantified for practical applications (Qizilbash 1996; Alkire 2002; Fukuda-Parr 2003; Mooney 2005; Qizilbash & Clark 2005; Comim, Qizilbash & Alkire 2008; Roche & Chiappero-Martinetti 2009). This usefulness of the approach for development work cries out for a more communal emphasis. Aid workers interact with their recipient populations at the level of communities, either political like towns or regions, social as defined by sex or race, or economic like tobacco farmers or textile workers unions. Whatever a community may be and however it is defined, aid workers deal with the collective as a whole instead of its members as individuals. If that is so, and if we also agree with my argument so far—that collectives are essential in creating both individual capabilities and the ethical criteria for their valuation—then we cannot escape the conclusion that the capability approach ought to have a more pronounced communal emphasis if it is to inform the actions and choices of those who employ it in their development work.

The communal emphasis I advocate prescribes a near-exclusive reliance on the principles of the people served by development workers. It demands that the choice of values and capabilities be determined ultimately by those who benefit from them; i.e., the beneficiaries of development. Whenever a collective chooses to partake in a development project (say, a technological upgrade or an educational reform), it already contributes all the moral and ideological material required to specify which capabilities are worth pursuing for that collective at that time, how their members will benefit from them, and which changes in SLTs that particular project should bring about that are necessary for the increase of those capabilities. And even though “professional” development workers may still deploy technically proficient methods of assistance, not to mention contribute material resources, the bulk of the theoretical baggage must be carried by the self-expressed and self-represented values of the recipients. This conclusion is inevitable if we agree that individual capabilities and the criteria for their valuations follow from communally determined principles.

What does this view entail for development aid as a whole? In general, a valid criterion to regulate the role of the Global North in development is to do all and only what is asked of us—give money, provide resources, and perform labor not as needed according to Northern ideas of development, but as asked; not as required, but as requested; not as “we” will, but as “they” will, where ‘they’ means the specific collective that we have chosen to serve. That choice may happen in the conventional ways, where development workers are personally or politically motivated to answer a particular call for help—say, Marxist transnational activists typically work with unions, feminist NGOs with women, etc. If there is a concern with unjust or oppressive power structures, that concern will play a role in the choice of which collective to serve. Surely this response flies in the face of those international aid workers who abide by the Red Cross principles of neutrality and impartiality; or who are animated by a desire to reduce suffering at all costs; or who believe

in liberating the oppressed wherever oppression exists—but these dissatisfactions are a natural consequence of my choice of principles.

The existing development paradigm is missing something that other humanitarian workers are well familiar with: an ethic of service. Inherent in the concept of development is the belief that solutions to large-scale and long-term political problems must be delivered with the technical expertise of social engineering. While I agree that they must, it is the recipients of development who must do so, not its proponents. All that development workers need to do is listen and follow, without assuming that they know best or that their aid recipients are ill-positioned to know their own socioeconomic condition of how to fix it (and perhaps that they are too uneducated, as in the ubiquitous “education is power” paradigm). This paternalism is unwarranted, and often it betrays certain racist and Orientalist assumptions about the so-called Third World (Jaggar 2005).

My account is simplistic in some ways, for there may be no unity in collectives that include many competing voices regarding what ideal development should look like: no one “voice of the community,” as it were. This is especially true of the fragmented sociopolitical landscapes of the South, which still struggles with decolonization within the artificial political borders imposed by their former colonial masters (Pogge 2003). But while indeed this is an obstacle, it is no reason to override local determinations in favor of an ideological standard peremptorily imposed from without. More often than not, that standard aligns with the agendas of development workers from the North while disregarding the agencies of local groups, and that is especially contradictory if development is seen as an increase in capability.

Surely the more radical critics of the concept of development (e.g., Ferguson 1990; Dichter 2003) will not be satisfied with this view. After all, what I propose is another round of technical and theoretical adjustments without altering the paradigm that the South needs to “develop” and that the North needs to assist. I do not deny this, and I do remain convinced of it, especially as I believe that the North owes a large debt to the South. But I hope to have shown with some clarity that the concept of development that I defend, based largely on an amended capability approach, is sufficiently respectful of the collective agency of those that it intends to serve, while at the same time disavowing claims to the North’s developmental superiority. That, I believe, should be plain even to those who would dispose of the concept of development altogether.

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