

Need, One World, and Progress

By: Latefah Alkanderi

All three of the essays in *The Development Dictionary* for the week of Oct. 18th focus on the negative aspects of development and modern concepts of wants, needs, and desires.

Ivan Illich's "Needs" essay is probably the harshest in its criticism of our modern society since World II. According to him, development led to a poisoning of the earth and worse, reshaped the minds of humans from *homo sapiens* to *homo miserabilis*. He states that, " 'basic needs' may be the most insidious legacy left behind by development. " (p. 89). As in a previous article by another author, Illich traces this recent history of the "needy man" to President Truman's speech on development after WWII.

Historically, the need for human salvation has been replaced by the concept of basic needs to be met for every one on the planet, regardless of cultural and religious limitations. Illich feels that this "needs disease" is actually a 20th century social habit that must be eliminated in the 21st century if hope is to return to society. He feels that with the emphasis on needs, people's hopes have been transmogrified into expectations, which lead to "claims, entitlements, and demands." (p. 91).

Instead of poverty being part of the human condition that all peoples in all cultures experience, forcing them to live within narrow limits, poverty is now something defined as not being "fully human" and viewed as victims of society. "By defining our common humanity by common needs, we reduce the individual to a mere profile of his needs." (p. 98).

Needs are now being replaced by 'basic requirements' to justify the earth's survival. In this new paradigm, people are reduced to "individual units with input requirements." (p. 98) Humans are being redefined not by their dreams or who we are, but rather by what we lack or need, which is a very negative viewpoint. He concludes by stating that the new meaning of needs is actually a "euphemism" for managing people who are now considered "subsystems" or "cases" within the world's population.

Illich's essay is definitely a statement against the "modern" idea of development, and probably aligns with others like him, such as Gandhi, Orr, and Gustavo. The theme continues with Sach's essay entitled "One World." His essay starts with the fact that the number of languages spoken around the globe is being reduced from 5,100 to 100 within the next generation or two. He compares this with species of animals dying out at an alarming rate, only with languages, the significance is that "entire cultures are vanishing from civilization." (p. 102).

Sach's point is that with languages also dying out at an alarming rate, cultures are faltering, and the world is becoming homogenized under the umbrella of a "global monoculture." So-called underdeveloped peoples and countries are losing their individual personalities in the name of peace and progress. Western ideas hinge on economic performance and that by globalizing the market we would guarantee peace. The Western concept of pursuing peace can only be done through the annihilation of diversity, and if we seek diversity it implies violence. The nightmare of global market restraints allows no space for self-determination, which has always been a part of the human condition and human hopes.

The author then moves from One Market to One Planet in his essay, and takes the idea of autonomy being a negative concept one step further. He writes about the imperative of planetary survival being linked to a new kind of colonialism called “eco-colonialism.” Global measures to curb the uses of natural resources mean that new rules will be imposed from some higher power for all to obey, “putting people’s daily activities under a new kind of scrutiny.” (109).

In his next section on Space Against Place, he brings his argument down to the level of every single person being tied to a physical place with a “web of social bonds.” (p. 111). In the interest of spreading “science, state, and market” worldwide, colonists, whether old or new, rob people of their institutions and treasures. One positive note in this section is that he believes that as universalism tries to prevail, a sense of the particular or place still thrives. Perhaps it is a kind of revolt.

At the present he observes that, “universalism is under siege.” (p. 112). Homogenization of *homo sapiens* has led to disappointment. He claims that, “diversity holds the potential for innovation ...”(p. 112). The three ideals that have emerged from this resurgence of diversity are: 1) regeneration, 2) unilateral self-restraint, and 3) the dialogue of civilization. What he is saying is that local, grass roots actions are resurfacing. These three ideals mean that we can redefine ‘one world’ as an idea for “cosmopolitan localism,” which focuses on local places and at the same time recognizes the rights of the rest of the world.

Jose Maria Sbert’s essay called “Progress,” is one more link in the whole concept of rethinking what development and progress mean to a planet with shrinking resources.

The author opens the essay with the statement that the modern world created a new faith--faith in progress.

Again, the uneducated people (by Western standards) in third world countries were defined as “underdeveloped” and were expected to accept the industrial way of life, because the Western ideology believed that industrial societies were the best mankind has ever known. Thus, modern man and society were defined by the concept of progress and to reject it was unthinkable. Further, material progress justified greed and arrogance by the Western belief in this new faith. Progress replaced religion in many places because progress became the new religion.

Accordingly, to have progress (over humanity in the name of humanity) the author claims it is necessary to strip the common man of his cultural, spiritual and personal autonomy and confidence. In its place we put science, economics and politics to promote progress. In so doing, it “overshadowed the importance of wisdom as existential, cultural experience.” (p. 199). Scientific and technical knowledge cannot replace the heart and soul of mankind.

Again, this author points out the futility in believing that progress is a realistic goal; rather it is an illusion because self-realization is the key that man needs to open doors. The essay ends on a rather negative note, because the author suggests that the concept of progress is so imbedded in man’s consciousness that he may not even be aware of it, and may end up just being a managed life in an abstract system.

Despite the fact that the majority of ideas in these essays are rather negative, each of the authors appears to have some insight into how we can escape the “fallout” from progress and development, if mankind can become aware of the ills of progress, and

within his or her own space begin to exercise the native wisdom of his space while being aware of the world around him. Again, the need seems to be that of a grass roots movement to take control of the spaces in which we live and treat the earth kindly, teaching our children the value of their native language, culture, dress and traditions.

Hopefully, all these essays will raise the consciousness of those who study these writers and bring these ideas back to our places and spaces and create a community where “right livelihood,” concern for others and the land replaces the greed that progress often brings.