

Why Development, Environment and Foresight?

Pavel Nováček // Pavel.Novacek@upol.cz,

Department of Development Studies, Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic

The world is changing quickly. Forty ears ago three billion people lived on planet Earth, yet today it is more than seven billion. Mankind has consumed more raw materials and energy over the last sixty years than in all its previous history.

More than forty years ago Man landed on the Moon for the first time and only four years later, in 1973, nobody imagined that journey to the Moon would be the last and that we would not be able to organize such travel again. Also nobody knew how revolutionary the development of portable computers, the internet and mobile telephones would be.

In the 21st century the world will probably change even more rapidly, and coming generations will be faced with great opportunities as well as threats. We should be able to cope with at least three global megachallenges: development, environment, and foresight (future oriented thinking).

Development

Historically, every society has had poor people. Poverty is not only a lack of income, but an inability to live life to the full because of a lack of economic means. Therefore people cannot develop their creative potential. Why are some nations rich and others poor? There are three principal guidelines that need explanation.

The roots of **dependency theory** (theory of core and periphery) go back to the early 20th century, when John A. Hobson defined imperialism as the colonial expansion of Western capitalist states. The Argentine economist, Raúl Prebisch, considered the world economy as a hierarchical system where the „centre“ creates a dependent „periphery“. The Czech anthropologist, Ivo Budil, pondering over the popularity of dependency theory, offers a psychological explanation. If people find out that things are not going well, they may ask why this is so in two ways. Firstly; „What are we doing wrong?“ Secondly; „Who is to blame?“ Looking for an external enemy seems to be psychologically more bearable.

The influence of geographical and environmental factors indicates geographical location (such as access to the sea) and the state of the environment as key factors for development and prosperity. With the exception of countries exporting oil and natural gas, there are only two states in the tropics that can be considered as developed and rich – Hong Kong and Singapore. On the other hand, geographical factors cannot explain everything. The Dominican Republic and Haiti both lie on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean Sea. While the Dominican Republic is a developing but stable country, Haiti has for decades been unable to escape from political instability and economic backwardness.

Cultural determinism asserts that „human resources“ are a decisive factor for prosperity. The roots of this determinism can be found in the classic work of the sociologist Max Weber, entitled „The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism“.

In 1985, Lawrence Harrison formulated four major factors that enable a society to achieve economic efficiency and prosperity. They are the measure of social trust, the severity of the ethical system, the performance of the authorities, and a focus on continuous work, innovation, savings and profit.

Environment

According to the OECD „a strong economy requires a healthy environment and a healthy environment requires a strong economy“. In 1972, Indhíra Gándhí announced; „Our biggest pollution is poverty.“ Fifteen years later, the UN Commission for Environment and Development, came up with the concept of sustainable development which should be socially acceptable, economically viable and friendly to the environment. We particularly need to develop environmental economics which study the ways in which the main economic activities influence the environment, and in which the condition of the environment and its protection influence the economy.

A key role in this shift to sustainable development is going to be played by natural capital, which includes water, soil, air, etc. It also encompasses living systems such as grasslands, savannas, wetlands, and rainforest.

Meadows, Meadows and Randers point out that our planet is developing over time without growing. Our economy of the finite and non-growing Earth must eventually adapt to a similar pattern of development. While there are limits to growth, it is necessary that there are no limits to development.

Foresight

Development and environment are important world megachallenges. To be able to face these challenges effectively, we need a „change of direction“ from past oriented thinking towards future oriented thinking. For generations we have been used to following the pattern „trial – error – experience“. Our present situation is much more complex. We have the power to do things that will affect not only family, community and region, but also the development of nations and the entire world. Moreover, the relationship between cause and effect is usually not at all clear and immediate.

The Report of the Club of Rome „No Limits to Learning“ called for „anticipatory learning“, i.e. learning from possible future situations and not only from the past. As the future is not predetermined and we have freedom of choice, it can be influenced by our behaviour. If the future can be influenced by the choices we make, it makes sense to study and see the future in all its diversity and to try to affect it in a positive way.

Forecasts affect the future just by being formulated. A forecast concerning a particular future condition (the outbreak of civil war, famine) can lead to activities that will prevent the forecast from being fulfilled.

Western countries have been able to develop a state of material well-being; they seem to be rich and mature. So why is it that in these regions individuals and states irresponsibly run into debt? Why is education turning into „infotainment“– the desire to have fun and not worry too much, even at the expense of quality?

Will today´s universities and other academic institutions be able to educate future elites? Can we give our students and young people in general more than just a certain amount of information? How can we transform data and information into knowledge and wisdom, in order to provide people with the ability to understand broader relations and consequences?

The Journal for Development, Environment and Foresight should become a platform for such broadly oriented multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary discussion. Future oriented thinking can become the key to solving current developmental and environmental issues and challenges. This kind of thinking cannot just be limited to answering the question, “how“ is something happening, but also “why“ and “what“ is the purpose. The ambition of this new journal is to open and cultivate such discussion.

Pavel Nováček // Editor-in-chief