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Development Strategies And Poverty Alleviation

It is increasingly clear that any or all development strategies as adopted to date have, by and large, fallen far short of the objective which is the alleviation of poverty. As we look back over the years since independence now nearing half a century, those of us who can remember will perhaps smile at our naivety for we thought, in our innocence, or ignorance, call it what you will, that all that was needed to turn this country into an Utopia was hard work, sincerity and faith in what we were doing and in ourselves. Economic growth through industrialisation was all it took to bring the fruits of independence to the doorsteps of the people. If these words sound hollow today it is because every method we have tried so far, has ended in miserable failure and, as a result, we have to contend with, at a minimum, double the number of poor in even worse conditions.

Whatever be the causes of poverty and the forces which help perpetuate it, we know they defy all and every attempt we can define as a cure which makes us think that no one strategy will suffice and a combination may be what is really necessary to make it all work for it was soon apparent the so-called 'trickle down' effect was not working. Once this was determined, alternative strategies had to be sought which would bring about the desired results. Therefore it was decided to take development straight to the people whose need was most. Thus was born the 'basic needs' strategy which would provide people with education, nutrition and other health services but, in the knowledge that this alone would not suffice simultaneously rural development would be taken up under an 'integrated rural development programme'. But this also was not to bring the desired result although it was recognised that without an educated workforce there could be little in the way of progress.

These two strategies in combination might have done the trick had there not occurred what was called the oil crisis when oil producing countries banded together to control production which caused prices to rise. This was disastrous for the low-income developing countries whose dependence on oil for development work caused their import bills to skyrocket. This was followed by an increased dependence on foreign aid which became, in time, the cause of the debt crisis from which developing countries have never been able to extricate themselves for many reasons but mainly because of the bottom falling out of the market for commodities. This combination of events made it certain that most developing countries would never be able to get out from under no matter which strategy for development they followed. Now, with their economies in a state of near collapse the new thinking required countries to restructure their economies through various measures. At this stage development planners and economic planners might do worse than to recall the words of the Pearson Report on economic growth which said, 'The growth process is still mysterious, and no decision maker can be absolutely certain that any of the effects of any particular change in policy such as devaluation, import liberalisation, export subsidy, land reform, or labour intensive rural programmes will produce precisely the effects planned'. More than 25 years later this assessment still holds true.

And more recently, in 1988, the findings of the World Bank Task Force while reviewing the relationship between economic growth and poverty alleviation indicate that very little, if anything at all, has changed within the intervening period for they said, 'Long term aggregate growth, while necessary, is not sufficient for the alleviation of absolute poverty at the desired speed. Benefits of national growth do not always accrue to those who are below the poverty line. In many instances, the poor do not possess the physical and human assets which would bring them higher returns. This helps explain why the number of people living in absolute poverty has increased in low-income countries even while respectable growth rates were achieved over the past three decades. Areas of complementarity between the twin objectives of efficient economic growth and the alleviation of poverty exceed those areas involving serious trade-offs. Pursuit of both objectives is therefore possible, indeed essential to lasting, stable and humane development'.

If that is truly so then we must consider anew what steps to take in combating poverty for it seems to us that until and unless the problem of health and malnutrition has been solved attempts to educate are generally futile. Which means care must begin with the mothers and down the line to their small babies and, when they are old enough to absorb – and retain – new learning, get them into school and keep them there. Only then will the problems created by an uneducated and, therefore, unskilled workforce, be finally solved and progress will finally be just around the corner.