Does Development Work?
Asking the Question Again in the Shadow of the Empire

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According to *Developments*, a magazine published through the UK Government Department for International Development, the answer is an unequivocal ‘yes’! Articles from across the world underline the slow but sure improvement in the lives of the poor, from Ghana to Nepal. There is no doubt, according to the magazine, that development delivers. The evidence seems strong, but what exactly is development delivering: a better life, or just further integration into a global economic and political system which will make the rich of any society richer and the poor, poorer. This article is not presented as a definitive answer, but rather as a provocation for all Christians to think seriously about the issues of development and the role of mission within it.

Certainly the data presented in the associated booklet, *Eliminating World Poverty*, provides interesting reading and at least partial encouragement. The first statistic, which I think is presented as a piece of good news, is that half a penny in each £1 of our taxes goes towards the UK’s efforts to reduce world poverty. (Significantly, the proportion which goes towards defence spending is not provided for comparison.)

So why does the UK government wish to provide such aid and what connection does this have with wider issues such as Christian mission? The stated reason is because we play a huge part in each others’ lives and that we have a moral obligation to fight poverty as a rich country. These reasons sound initially laudable, and indeed we cannot afford to be cynical about them. There are numerous people involved in aid and development work and the vast majority are motivated by love for their neighbours, whatever their religion or lack of it, whatever their background. The sight of a hungry child, a waste dump which is home to that child, and the lack of the basic provision that we take for granted in this country, is all the motivation that many need. Most of us do think that people everywhere are entitled to a decent standard of living, decent sanitation, education. Many Christians need no further excuse for their involvement in various development projects than this humanitarian desire to reach out to those that are less fortunate, though they would want to add that they are also inspired by God’s love. Nevertheless, this does not absolve us from asking some important questions about the relationship of mission to development. Sadly we are probably about 150 years late in posing such questions!

So, these are the questions that have come to me as a Christian engaged in development work and as the owner and founder of an organisation which seeks to remedy some of the environmental impacts associated with economic development, and which is undertaken as a Christian ministry as well as a business.

The word ‘development’ is itself full of unspoken colonialism; to say that development is required, is to assume that there is undevelopment. This is most often done from a Western perspective and therefore, anywhere where people do not subscribe to Western values, must be in need of development. Once again in order to ensure that I am not accused of gross arrogance, please be assured I am all for children being saved from HIV and given clean drinking water; however if the sole purpose is to create new markets, new economic components, new fuel for the fire of the global economy then I am simply asking the question can this be seen as good, or Godly, ‘development’. In fact is this not just the current manifestation of Egypt, Rome, the beast of the Earth (Rev 13), a commercial power in opposition to God’s love?
Looking through the various magazines concerning development that regularly come across my desk, the focus is nearly always on the economic, and governance. Environmental and ‘social’ development (what ever that means!?) is sometimes mentioned, but is certainly second fiddle to the need to ‘make poverty history’.

Before, once again, I am accused of heresy, I would like to point out that my organisation has been a firm supporter of the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign, almost since its inception. However this serves to illustrate my point, if ‘making poverty history’ requires the extension of a global economic Empire, then surely as Christians we must at the very least be asking questions. How can we square this circle?

There are many of you who may now be saying, ah, but you see, we are all in it, we are all part of this Empire whether we like it or not, and that is a valid point. The Empire is strong and constantly reminding us of the peace and prosperity it has delivered. Interestingly, it forgets to tell us of all the disbenefits that it has also brought. This is left to the ‘looney left’, the new agers and various other fringe social groupings, and who listens to them? Only those who have ears, I suspect.

There is no doubt in my mind as an environmental professional that an economic system based on individual greed and lack of contentment has wrought massive environmental damage. I am also reliably informed that it is a major contributor to a widening gap between rich and poor even in the West. This includes the breakdown of family order and the consumerisation of everything, which in turn leads to all types of addictions, from sex to retail.

At least, you may say, we have not had a major war to fight in Europe for nearly 70 years! The Empire claims to deliver peace to our homelands; however recent wars in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and the Middle East as well as the upsurge in terrorism must at least bring a thinking Christian to question the claims that the Empire is as beneficial as the advertisements that streak across our computer screens, mobile telephones, fax machines, television screens, and ipods (all products of ‘development’) would have us believe.

So what now? We are damned if we do and we are damned if we don’t, at least according to my argument to date. What are we to do? Should we let people go without clean water or western medical provision because we might be serving the very forces that we Christians are (or at least should be) in conflict with? Or should people go without roads and new transport infrastructure because they will add to climate change? Are we, as the UK Comedy Show, Dad’s Army suggests, all doomed?

Of course not. Mission should, I believe, start where development finishes. In many ways the Bible itself is a tale of two cities, the city of Babel and the city of Jerusalem. Superficially they have many similarities: there are buildings, parks and gardens, walls. They are homes to multitudes of people and they are governed. But the nature of these two cities could not be more different. One is a city of bondage, a factory ruled by, and for, the elite, and one is a city of love, community and relationship. One has beautiful gardens and beautiful buildings, one is simply engineered for function, ‘reaching into heaven’. One promises much and delivers little, the other promises everything and delivers more. In one of these cities, there are only bad relationships and in the other, relationships are healthy and wholesome.

This picture has something to teach us about the relationship of development to mission. God’s mission is about creating the second city (or community or world, if you like) while the Empire is trying to create the first. As we have seen, there are apparent similarities, but at heart the two could not be more different. Development, of itself, is part of the ‘progress
paradigm'; mission should be about reconnecting people with God, but also with themselves, with others, with their environment and world. To do this, they will need clean water, infrastructure, good medical care etc, but not just to become parts of an economic master system.

In my case, the organisation that I have become involved in is seeking to restore the environments of places that have suffered from the impacts associated with buying into the Empire’s vision of the future. This is, I believe, a profoundly Christian thing to do and potentially subversive. On the face of it, it also appears to be development work, bringing relief to poor communities. But taken to the extreme it will see people reduce what they consume, reduce what they think they need, in effect reduce their economic activity and therefore reduce the economic power of their country. This is not considered to follow any known development model. Interestingly, people in the Global South are closer to nature than those of us in the industrialised north, but many if not most, are already addicted to damaging consumerism. However before I discourage you again, it is worth remembering that addiction is in my opinion an opportunity to reconnect with God. Things are addictive because they are feeding on the ‘God streak’ in the person that is addicted. Rather than pulling people away from God, they can draw people towards him. As with any empire, this Empire is no different: the seeds of its destruction are within it.

The job of Christian mission is to water and care for those other seeds – the seeds of the tree of life – so that they mature and bring forth fruit, fruit that is good to eat. Finally we will see the world developed as God originally intended it.

About the Author

Simon Penney is completing his Masters Degree in Global Issues in Contemporary Mission at Redcliffe College. He is also the owner and founder of Promise Consulting, a Christian Environmental Consultancy that provides charitable advice to mission agencies, relief and development and other organisations involved in meeting the environmental needs of communities around the world. He has spoken at conferences in the UK and US and also writes regularly. To find out more about Promise Consulting please go to www.promiseconsulting.org.uk. He lives with his wife and two young children in North Eastern Scotland.