

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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### Summary

This article deals with an anthropological perspective on human development defining anthropology as a holistic approach, which is both diachronic and synchronic. It includes a consideration of all aspects of people's social, economic and cultural life including the social habits of the community. It not only includes the ways in which people in any given community live but also how it is affected on the local level by everything that is going on in the regional, national and international arenas. Thus an anthropological perspective on issues of human development is cross-cultural, and includes an examination of the present political and economic theology of globalization, with a clearly articulated emphasis on the context-appropriate rebuilding or retention of

local economies, with a view toward the protection of the environment, the preservation of cultural diversity, and the empowerment of local communities and their members. Anthropologists are aware of the wealth of human societies, and their diverse ways of empowering people and providing for their basic needs, including a sense of community. While all human beings have certain basic needs, including clean air and clean water, meaningful work and a decent living standard, great inequalities exist both within and between nation states. Thus an anthropologist would ask of any proposed development program whether it will decrease inequality and provide more of what is needed for the whole population, or less.

Projected increases in world population imply a need for more food than is currently produced. The advocates of corporate globalization propose to solve this problem through the use of GMO seeds and corporate control of land and water. But the problem of hunger is much more a matter of unequal distribution than of supply. In fact, it has been argued that the world can produce more than enough to feed its population in the year 2020, but having food in warehouses is not enough. The corporate model currently being followed addresses none of the issues of inequality, including the dispossession of farmers, the lack of meaningful employment for large numbers of people, and the general disempowering of the vast majority of people, both urban and rural, in the third world and the "developed" world. Acceptance of this model by economists, governments and corporations is supported by a belief that the change to corporate agriculture is inevitable and unstoppable, whereas this trend has clearly arisen through explicit governmental decisions, which favor large agricultural holdings. The application of this model has already led, both in "developed" and "developing" countries, to severe environmental damage and the destruction of local communities. However, in the early years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more people world-wide are focusing on buying locally produced food, and movements such as the "slow food movement" which started in Italy are growing in importance as the issue of "food miles" and more attention is being paid to the related increases in CO<sub>2</sub> and global warming.

Because most anthropologists work with local communities of different sizes world-wide, our perspective includes hard data from the field which show that the belief in growth at all costs and the automatic acceptance of "efficiencies of scale" are not only illusory, but also hide many of the environmental and social costs of these policies. From this perspective, more attention needs to be paid to issues of local autonomy, social capital, and relocalization. Policy decisions which affect the quality of life for most people in any given community or area need to be given the highest priority. For true human development, agricultural production needs to focus more on local food requirements than on trade. As opposed to focusing on international competition with its emphasis on keeping all costs as low as possible, especially labor costs, most anthropologists would advocate a more holistic approach to the needs of society. We would see the role of governments as controlling, rather than abetting, the multinational corporations' control over the world food system, and ensuring the security of localized farming, as well as providing protective mechanisms in other domains of life such as education, health care, and even industrial production. An anthropological perspective on development would encourage a sustainable people-oriented approach to all these aspects of life, while accepting considerable variation from one area to another.

## **1. The Ways in which Anthropology Considers Issues of Development**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This article deals with an anthropological perspective on human development defining anthropology as a holistic approach, which is both diachronic and synchronic. It includes a consideration of all aspects of people's social, economic and cultural life including the social habits of the community. It not only includes the ways in which people in any given community live but also how it is affected on the local level by everything that is going on in the regional, national and international arenas. It also recognizes the complex interrelationships that exist between different aspects of people's lives. Anthropologists are aware of the wealth of human societies, and of the importance of their cultural diversity and bio-diversity, their diverse ways of empowering people through a sense of community. Like others, anthropologists are aware that in many countries levels of health care, nutrition, and children's education are low today. And certainly most anthropologists would agree that it is desirable to raise these levels. However, the causes of these low levels also need to be examined. How much is the direct result of earlier colonial experiences, of warfare (often fostered, though not caused exclusively, by the West)?

### **1.2 What is Development?**

Certainly most anthropologists would agree that if "development" leads to a homogenized world where western cultural values and ways of life prevail for all societies, this would be regarded as disempowering for at least some of the participants. Often the solutions most suitable to the local people would involve greater government investment, rather than the downsizing or privatizing often proposed by western development experts. Indeed, in countries such as India the extent to which some poor people, often from low or untouchable castes, have managed to obtain an education, better health care etc., is closely related to the role of government in providing these. Without major government intervention, on both national and state levels, the poor and the low-ranking would never get much of a chance. The role of government in protecting the poor is discussed in more detail below.

‘Development’ is a deceptive term because it has been used as a catchall for many different viewpoints. It refers to a number of very diverse processes, mostly ones that move a society in the direction of American or western European societies. Some anthropologists might even say that we should scrap the word because of its concealed western bias. In recent years, the term has taken on new and varied meanings, as is clearly seen in the various debates about the environment.

In this article the word ‘development’ is used to refer to the classical notion of economic and social development with a focus on human needs and human capital. It is often thus defined as the process of change whose goal is to increase the wealth of a community or a nation by raising incomes [defined in terms of their GDP] , increasing access to services, reducing unemployment, and expanding human capital -- another often ambiguous term. It has been defined as a process of directed change, whose direction is

set by international agencies and the West.

At its best, development is defined as "sustainable", meaning that the changes being proposed are believed to be ones that will be self-perpetuating and ecologically sound. On the other hand, in most uses the word reflects a western view of the world as propagated by the very clever mass media of the West. Though few would say it outright, it usually means a direction of change, which leads to the opening of new markets for western consumer goods, and consumerism replacing traditional culture. Is not human development the same as social development? This question has been raised by a number of feminists as well as women's groups in India. They note that while human development among India's tribal population, as judged by the usual indicators, is the lowest in India, this is the only identifiable group in India where the juvenile sex ratio is influenced only by biology rather than social or behavioral norms. The sex ratios for the rest of India show a preponderance of males for all age groups, reflecting neglect of female health, foeticide, and selective abortion. Some Indian feminists ask a very important question: should not social or human development also include a larger context of collective ethics and responsibility for society as a whole? Are economic indicators the only acceptable indicators of "development"?

It is equally important to unpack the terms 'globalization' and 'corporatization'. 'Globalization' is used here in the way it is used by most economists as well as those involved with development in a wide range of capacities. It is not always easy to differentiate it from corporatization except to note that they are referring to a global arena, not a local one.

### **1.3 Development and Social Policy**

Social policy, including concern for human development, is changing rapidly at the beginning of the 21st century. Indeed, at an exponentially increasing pace, the countries of the world, and even their most isolated peoples, have been tied into the global economy. This has been accomplished by the increase in control of third-world nations by countries of the West (and even Japan). Now that these countries have largely abandoned direct colonization, today they control indirectly through economic means. No longer is human development shaped by the local community alone; today it is also shaped by international, national, or local elites as well as agencies such as the World Bank, the various regional Banks, the International Monetary Fund, the various trade agreements such as the World Trade Organization and the agreements under it such as GATT and more regional ones such as NAFTA, the European Union, and large multinational corporations such as Monsanto and Cargill.

The interrelated dimensions of the globalization processes as they affect human development are experienced differently by varying segments of the world's population. Yet, as noted in a 1997 UNDP paper, internationally and nationally, the world economy of the mid 1990s, points to persistent poverty and widening inequalities. The report goes on to note that perhaps at no time since the 1930s has the need for concerted international action to regulate global economic forces been so obvious, but at no time since then has the vision of political leaders (and by implication of their economic advisors) been as myopic as it is now. One of the main concerns of the founding fathers

of the Bretton Woods system was to avoid a return to the unfettered capital movements, which caused such havoc between WWI and WWII. Today, most government leaders and free-market economists appear to believe that no government can pursue full employment and protect all of its citizens' basic social and economic rights, and that therefore these must be abandoned in the name of growth. The large variation in the productive and reproductive activities in particular national contexts, combined with the intersections of structures of inequality such as race, class, caste, ethnicity and gender', act to create radically different social, economic, political, cultural and experiential realities for different segments of the world's population.

#### **1.4 Implications of Development for People's Lives**

Certainly all human beings require that certain basic needs be met. These include:

- clean breathable air;
- Enough water to meet a range of functions, including drinking, bathing, irrigation, cleaning dwellings, utensils, etc.
- a nutritious diet based on human needs (vitamins, proteins, carbohydrates, and micro- nutrients) in forms that are culturally appropriate;
- adequate clothing appropriate to the climate and the social milieu;
- shelter commensurate with cultural expectations, the physical environment, and the political conditions;
- meaningful work, which provides a role and status in society;
- equal access to "modern" as well as "traditional" health care and the possibility of choice;
- the right to freedom of expression, limited only by the need to avoid harm to others;
- The right for each sub-sector of the population to mortality and morbidity indices that are not grossly different from those of the wealthy.

Traditional societies normally provided for people's sense of who and what they were, and sustained viable communities, which provided a framework for people's lives. They answered questions such as -- Who am I? What is my purpose in life? To whom do I matter, apart from my immediate family or close kin? They gave people a sense of *communitas*. And people continue to need these in order to have a sense of well-being. Looking at any development program, the question to ask is: if people have all of this, as well as a decent standard of living, will the planned development give them more (or perhaps a more reliable version) of what they need, or less? Anthropological perspectives on Human Development start from a different place than many other approaches. They tend to start with the questions: What is meant by development in a particular context? What is being developed? For whom?

There is a story going around in anthropological circles told in a variety of ways about a development agent talking to a Central American peasant farmer, telling him he could grow more than three times as much as he was growing, and discussed how this would benefit him and his family. The farmer asked: "Why should I bother to grow more? We have more than enough to eat. Our requirements are mostly met by the money I earn two months in the year when I descend to the plains to work for some company. I do not

like that work, but for 10 months of the year my work is not too heavy, and I can enjoy all of the festivals and the comfort of my home". The development officer tried hard to explain that if he worked very hard all the time on his own land, and made use of the innovations he was trying to spread, the man would be able to save a considerable amount of money for a rainy day. The farmer answered, "But in bad times such as when the rains fail, I can always go and work more for that company, and anyhow who knows when that will be? Meanwhile I can enjoy life. Why should I work so hard and spend a lot of time and energy to grow more?" The development officer again spoke about saving money. "For what?" "So that you can retire and live comfortably and not work so hard". The point was not lost on the farmer, who thought that was exactly the kind of life he was living at present.

Most development practitioners would claim that because the farmer does go down to the lowlands for two months in the year and claims to see it as a possible source of protection in case of a failure of the rains, that he is already dependent on outside forces. Yet, as has been reported by numerous people who have worked in these areas, when faced with a choice between accepting what is being offered by outside development personnel and having to forgo the extras bought by the money earned in the lowland, or even by not having the lowland work as a kind of back-up, people still living in many semi-traditional cultures, would find the threat to their way of life or "raison d'etre" more serious than having to tighten their belts or eat less for a period of time. This is important, because our view of "economic man", tends to ignore this perspective. This alternative to the views of economists and political scientists is at least worth considering in any development planning. Yet, we know even from the west, that some people have deliberately chosen to try and live "simply", that is, cutting down their expenses to live a more ecologically sound life. Certainly the world view that puts high value on community coherence, one's sense of "this is our way of doing things", and the pleasure and internal satisfaction gained from this must not be glossed over; in fact, it needs to be taken as a significant part of Human Development.

### **1.5 Development and Ideology**

If human development is taken to refer to all of the people on this planet, the critical linkages between ideology and public policy just mentioned cannot be ignored. This includes people's ways of supporting themselves and their families, ways of living, which set the patterns for the very core of human existence, including the integrity of their community's way of life. The ideologies and beliefs of those making policy and those carrying it out have had profound effects on human life. (A more detailed analysis of this is given in the section on agriculture, where one sector of the economy is examined in more detail.) The ideology of development specialists, most economists, and people in planning, especially those with a middle-class background or accepting western values, is different from that described above.

The ideology being referred to here consists of a set of closely interrelated beliefs. The most important belief, which informs all the others, is that "growth" is the most important imperative for countries or regions to eliminate poverty. It is supported by a belief that limitless growth is a real possibility for all, and an equation of growth with a 19<sup>th</sup>- century view which links western society and culture with "progress". Another key

belief is that the critical imperative for any country is to maintain international competitiveness, and that the central role of governments should not be to regulate markets but to facilitate, at any cost to their people, the relentless expansion of their economies by removing all barriers to trade and investment. This version of globalization is said to be the only way in which poor countries, or poor segments within countries, can ever improve. There is a belief that international trade can only have positive results for most people, and this belief has been deeply inculcated in the minds of political elites. These beliefs often ignore reality to the extent that they do not acknowledge the existence of poor communities in the West, which suffer from rising unemployment or under-employment, increasing income gaps, and increasing poverty. This orientation ignores the impact of these forces on economically vulnerable families the world over, including most obviously women and children.

The unquestioned view that globalization is inevitable, and that world trade is the only way the world is likely to go, is very deeply rooted in development institutions, even in the third world. This belief has been expressed by a number of planners and economists, both in the United States and in India. It has been uncritically accepted into the discourse of economic, political and social discussions at all levels, and serves to disempower vast numbers of people. It is also evidence of an enormous gulf, which divides the vast majority of the people, both in the more "developed" countries and in the third world, from their leaders and those who advise them. This mantra is echoed internationally among the elites making governmental policy in both newly industrializing countries and poor countries. It has been noted that among managers of multinational corporations the main objective has been to create a steady stable growth of 10-15% increase in earnings per share for each and every year, which takes precedence over all human concerns.

There is a deep-seated belief among development specialists that there is one solution to everything, and that temporary problems will eventually right themselves, even though the only examples, which are supposed to prove this, are some Southeast Asian countries, which are again suffering greatly in the early 21st- century. The believers in the ideology of growth do not ask the question "Whose growth?" Who can possibly gain from these changes? A recent e-mail sent out by Diverse Women for Diversity (an NGO working primarily in India) notes that one of the influential Indian economists, discussing the impact of the removal of import restrictions on Indian producers, said, "The poor can buy Barbie dolls". This was said at a time when the average Indian consumer is struggling to meet basic food needs.

## **1.6 Techniques of Persuasion: Manipulating Minds**

So why have people gone along with this? Why have so many third-world nations accepted these beliefs? There are several factors involved. The first is that, for many third world countries, still recovering from the effects of long- term colonization, it is not always easy to break with the unconscious ways that the colonizers used to separate the elite from everyone else. Second is the increasing importance of techniques to manipulate and manage people's consciousness, which propagate such notions as (1) the myth of individualism; (2) the belief in the "end of communism or socialism"; (3) the belief that human nature is fixed and unchanging, and demands a competitive, "me-

first" orientation; and (4) a very pessimistic appraisal of human potential. From comedies to dramas to news articles that titillate, the mass media world-wide carry the message that everyone is potentially corrupt, that individuals are all basically out for their own material gain, that only saints care about others, that human nature cannot ever change, and that only the personal profit motive can work to get people to work harder or do more. The third factor is the way in which there is a flashing of material goods or commodities so that many people see them as desirable and are not aware of the costs involved.

Information is usually provided to people in fragments, in contexts, which are designed, either to simply entertain, or to confirm already formed opinions and ways of planning for the future. In the developed world, corporate control of the mass media is increasingly held by a few companies, and the push towards privatization is driving the media in the same direction in many third-world countries. The nature of production has changed, and now aims at producing global products, be they automobiles, food items, or news. Its audience is its customer. Political concepts and views, whether in India or the United States or elsewhere, are more and more spread through the media, with simple messages, often less than one minute long. Truth doesn't matter; it all happens in 60-second slots, so there is no time for people to reflect.

Living through times of transition is disturbing for many people. While capital moves and is manipulated in cyber-space, people live in real time. Overwhelming evidence reveals a deeply cynical view that corporations have of ordinary citizens. They assume that the public's own perception of things such as technological risks is only based on emotional factors, not rational factors. Thus corporate leaders and shapers of public information believe that the public is incapable of responsibly deciding for themselves and needs corporate hand-picked experts to make decisions for them. Powerful political domination over the mass media in the United States to a large extent, and elsewhere to some extent, has if anything increased between 2000 and 2006.

The international movement in relation to globalization of goods and services across borders, and people's integration into both the formal and the informal sectors of the labor force, takes many forms throughout the world. While the details of this are outside of the purview of this paper, the example of what happened locally when Senegal was no longer able to export peanuts - formerly its major export crop, - or what is happening to Indian locksmiths in Aligarh in 2001 where cheap Chinese locks are taking over the market, or in the mid- 1980s when the onions grown in the Jaffna peninsula (Sri Lanka) lost out to temporarily lower-priced imports from Europe, must be examined in terms of their human impact, including their potential for exacerbating conflict.

Anthropologists in combination with other social scientists have documented the impact on Human Development of these "development" policies, which are actually designed to reduce social safety nets, and how they have had different consequences depending on a family's class position. Today there are a growing number of people and organizations world-wide examining and critiquing what is happening.

## **1.7 Comparability of Countries**

Anthropologists using a diachronic as well as synchronic perspective, must pay close attention to where a region is at its so-called starting point. From this perspective it is clearly not useful to compare a country like India with a small Southeast Asian country. Southeast Asian nations had a very different experience of colonialism from India's; they have much smaller populations and less dire poverty. Even China is not comparable to India, for different reasons relating to its history, social structure, revolutionary history, and a totalitarian government, which finds it easy to pay extremely low wages to factory workers.

Global trends in inequality can only be seen through specific lenses. Interestingly, the decrease in the child death rate and increase in life expectancy found in Sri Lanka and Kerala did not correlate with economic growth. However, these must be seen in a specific perspective. In the case of Sri Lanka, these changes came about during a fairly long period of elected socialist governments, and since the late 1980s with the increase in privatization and World Bank plus other western loans, the quality of health care and rural education has again sunk to lower levels. In the case of Kerala, again the better health care was a direct result of a strong leftist government, which supported rural clinics. This is again decreasing as privatization of health care is starting to emerge.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Joan Mencher** is a cultural anthropologist recently retired from Lehman College of CUNY and the CUNY Graduate Program in Anthropology. She is the Director of The Second Chance Foundation, a very new organization founded in 2003 in New York. Her doctoral research was conducted in a Puerto Rican slum neighborhood in New York City in the 1950s. She has worked in India for more than fifteen years spread out over the past 4 decades. Her work has mostly been in rural areas of the south as well as West Bengal. She has also been a consultant in other parts of the country for UNFPA, the World Bank, UNIFEM, UNDP, and USAID. She has also worked briefly in Sri Lanka and other areas in Asia, as well as visiting rural areas in Kenya and the Caribbean.

In recent times, most of her publications have involved issues of development, especially as they relate to agriculture and/or women. The majority of her fieldwork has been in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and is concerned with both planned and unplanned changes over the period 1958 - 2001. She was writing on the "Green Revolution" in India from its inception and is currently involved in looking at successful sustainable agricultural experiments in South India. Prof. Mencher has written a book on Tamil Nadu agriculture, has edited and contributed to 4 other books, as well as having written more than 60 articles. She is currently involved in writing several books on Kerala including one on the political economy of gender from earliest times until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and a collection on women's life histories in collaboration with a Malayalee colleague. She presented papers on sustainable agriculture in 2005 and 2006 and is currently working on a popular book based on research in south India as well as a jointly edited book on Dalits (untouchables) in India with Dr. Subhadra Channa.