Science, Religion and Development: Exploring the Nexus

A Roundtable Meeting organized by the Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development, DAVV and the Department of Sociology, IIT, Indore as part of the bi-monthly series 'Dialogues on Development'

Concept Note

The Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya in collaboration with the Department of Sociology, IIT, Indore is organizing a roundtable meeting on the theme 'Science, Religion and Development: Exploring the Nexus'. The purpose of this gathering is to initiate a dialogue about the need for a new perspective on development that brings together both science and religion.

The crisis in development

Despite the enormous investment of resources, time and labor over nearly seven decades, the field of development has tragically failed to achieve even its most basic objectives such as abolishing poverty and hunger and ensuring a secure and dignified life for the masses of the world's people. If anything, the world has become a far more divided and unjust place. The gulf between the rich and the poor has never been wider, the devastation of the environment continues unchecked, there is widespread social unrest and behaviors characterized by greed and self-centeredness which undermine the social fabric have gained prominence.

Many within the development community have come to believe that the challenge lay in the way in which development has been conceived. The assumption that underlies much of development thinking and practice is that material development is the key to a population's progress. Material reality is considered the most fundamental aspect of existence and the spiritual, social and cultural aspects of human life are seen either as byproducts of the material condition or they are assigned secondary importance to it.

The missing dimension

What such a materialistic conception ignores is that the vast majority of human beings continue to view their identity as spiritual at the fundamental level. It is the spiritual aspect of life that ennobles and gives meaning to material existence. It has an intimate relationship with morality and ethics.

Without fully acknowledging the spiritual dimension of existence, development programs do not connect with the inner lives and motivations of the people they are meant to serve. Development efforts seeking enduring changes in behavior are unlikely to succeed unless they appeal to moral and spiritual imperatives. Further, when spiritual principles such as unity and justice are allowed to shape the vision of development, a vision of social existence emerges that is in tune with the higher nature of human beings. Rather than viewing collective existence as an endless competition among intelligent social animals for resources, prestige and power it becomes possible to envision the interactions between social actors in terms of mutual assistance, cooperation and selfless service to the common good.

Science and religion

Thus, if development is to build capacity in populations to take charge of their own progress, it must address both the material and the spiritual dimensions of existence. To do this, it needs to draw upon both science and religion as the two sources of knowledge that have advanced civilization. The methods of science have allowed humanity to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing material and social reality. Religion, as a system of knowledge, has helped us understand the spiritual aspect of existence. It explores the deepest motivations of human behavior and provides spiritual principles to guide actions.

The discourse on science, religion and development has been going on for more than two decades now throughout the world among academics, development practitioners, policy makers and a large number of international and national development agencies. This gathering is a modest effort to bring together a few concerned thinkers and practitioners in Indore to explore a broadened vision of development that brings together science and religion.

Given below are a few questions to stimulate discussion on this theme:

- When we refer to religion in this discourse, we are not talking about any one particular religion but rather the common religious heritage that has civilized humankind throughout the ages with a set of common moral and spiritual teachings. This spiritual core of religion must be distinguished from fanaticism and man-made dogmas and superstitions. What are some of these spiritual and moral teachings common to all religions and which of them are most relevant to development work?
- How can spiritual principles be operationalized in a development program? Most of us know what it means to act according to spiritual principles in our individual lives. But how do these principles apply at the level of the organization or at the social level? To take the example of the principles of justice and the oneness of humankind, how can a population be mobilized to arise for justice without creating an 'us and them' mentality or causing them to lose empathy for the oppressor and fail to perceive their humanity? What form does a development project take that seeks to remedy or remove injustice without creating antagonism towards the unjust but rather seeks to involve them in the process of transformation?
- A common misconception is to equate science with technology. Science generates models about physical and social reality while technology has to do with the application of this knowledge. What kind of capacities does a community need to develop in order to be scientific in their approach to pursuing their own social and economic advancement? How can people be helped to preserve and retain the indigenous knowledge and technologies developed within communities?