

Development: Their Way and Ours

by Ted Trainer

It is almost impossible to get the development establishment, including governments, academics and NGOs, to recognize the existence of any alternative conception to conventional growth-and-trickle-down development theory and practice. Following is an attempt to drive home the difference, based on the famous “industrial egg” illustration by Bill Mollison (1988, pp. 23–4). The alternative approach is indented in bold.

Almost everyone involved in “development,” from the elite level of UN agencies and guru academics and theoreticians, through the myriad of foreign affairs departments, aid workers and NGO agencies, to the ordinary people on the ground in impoverished regions, takes for granted the same single idea of what development is and has to be. Development is seen essentially in terms of cranking up the amount of production for sale in the market. Sometimes urgent needs are attended to directly, e.g., via aid targeted to immunization, but there is no doubt that in the long run the capacity of a country to meet its needs will be a function of the national economic wealth it has built up. More income means more capacity to purchase, by individuals and governments, more tax revenue, greater capacity to invest. So you must plunge into the national and global economies and sell, “educate” people to do jobs in factories, turn out university graduates to run enterprises, attract capital investment, compete hard against all others trying to export your crop or mineral. And you must get people out of rural villages and into the urban factories. You must, in other words, get rid of traditional subsistence ways. Even Marx realized that.

The discussion here is not primarily concerned with the reasons why this growth-and-trickle-down approach to, and conception of, “development” is abhorrent and technically and morally wrong. It is now being praised as having lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, and that is true. But (a) it is a morally repugnant process whereby disgusting amounts of wealth accrue to the rich for every crumb that finds its way to the poor, (b) at present rates of growth it will be another 100 years or more before most people reach reasonable “living standards,” by which time the rich two billion will be at astronomical levels of wealth, (c) the ecstatic claims never attend to the vast wreckage that the process creates, the millions tipped off their land and deprived of livelihood, the shredded forests, the Chinese lung disease rate from the industrial pollution, the Indian farmer suicide rate—what would a proper accounting show the net gain to be, and (d) the fact that this whole process cannot go on for much longer.

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The planet has gone through the limits to growth. This “development” path is totally unsustainable, it is intensely energy and resource squandering, and that game is rapidly coming to an end. Against this background it is most disturbing that despite these points having been made by a few for decades the mainstream still completely fails to

recognize them. There is no recognition that a totally different conception of “development” has to be adopted.

The following notes indicate the nature of the alternative. They attempt to make clear how it flatly contradicts the dominant consumer-capitalist conception at every point. The approach is somewhat indirect, focusing on the immense difference

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between the way eggs are produced in consumer-capitalist society and the kinds of systems that make sense in a world of scarce resources and serious ecological constraints (indented and in bold type.)

Factories...

...produce steel girders, tin, bolts, machinery, tractors, pipes, irrigation equipment, trucks...and petrol to run the trucks. In addition to the energy used in the factories there is the energy needed to produce the factories and input materials, especially the energy to run the factories. These outputs are used to build:

- Egg factories—vast sheds containing thousands of hens in inhumane conditions;
- Silos to hold grain;
- Machinery;
- Water supply systems;
- Roads to farms producing feed;
- Egg processing equipment, packaging, labelling, especially the energy-intensive refrigeration;

- Chemicals, e.g., to control disease in the sheds; and
- Trucks and systems to dispose of the chicken manure, which does not go back to the fields which grew it;
- International systems for production of the steel etc. to make all the factories, ships, aircraft, buildings, high-rise offices, etc.

**...modern soil-mining
agriculture runs down soils...**

Backyard and village cooperative pens can be made from scrap materials and local saplings, earth etc., plus a small amount of wire netting and tin for roofing. No need for steel girders, trucks, machinery, ships. Poultry and other animals fed mostly via free range and recycling of kitchen scraps to soils. Processing of eggs and meat via local informal arrangements, or small village coops and “firms.” No transport, marketing, insurance, personnel departments...

Offices...

...where most egg producers work at managing the inventories, orders, logistics, deliveries, payments, advertising, marketing, financial arrangements—most people getting eggs to you wear suits and sit at computer screens and use energy driving to work.

Kids can look after chickens. Only a few simple (but important) skills are needed.

These offices are made from steel, concrete, glass, aluminum and plastics, and they need carpets, air conditioning, coffee, desks, personnel departments, electricity, paid cleaners—and lots of computers and suits.

Few egg producers ever see a chicken or an egg, or enjoy communicating with them.

We don’t need any of that.

Degrees

Most egg producers have tertiary qualifications, complex skills in accounting, chemistry, vet science, management, finance, logistics, that can take 20 years of “education” to get. Many lawyers are involved in the production of eggs.

Kids can look after chickens. Only a few simple (but important) skills are needed.

Environmental destruction, resource wastage

Food production via modern soil-mining agriculture runs down soils

(acidification, losses of carbon and soil nutrients; monocultures require pesticides). Energy- and materials-intensive infrastructure systems contribute to the global resource impact of industrial society.

High density sheds require antibiotics etc. Manure is often a waste problem, eutrophying waterways, inefficiently used or dumped, not returned to soils that produced the feed.

Chickens, free range, eat kitchen food scraps, returning nutrients to soils, eat pests (e.g., snails), clear weeds, aerate soils by scratching, enhance leisure-rich landscapes. No pesticides, few resources, no energy. Healthier chickens, so few chemicals or vets needed.

Work

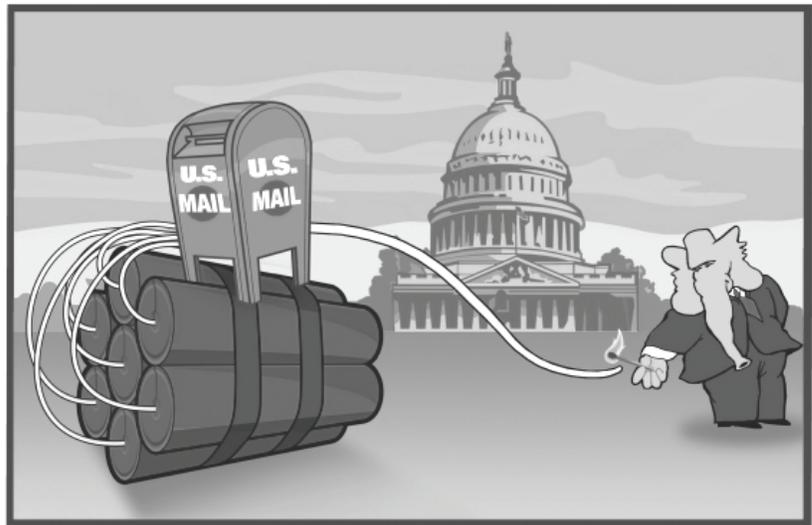
Typically boring, routine narrow work, in the sheds or at the screens all day.

No work. Chickens are a delight to care for, involving a few minutes a day, via home pens or village co-ops and rosters.

Social, leisure, community-bonding benefits, synergism, overlaps, integration effects.

None. Eggs are only a commodity. Costs are multiplied, e.g., manure becomes a problem requiring energy and expenditure. Agribusiness destroys country towns.

Poultry and other animals enrich the local landscape with diversity, closeness to nature, tasks and responsibilities for kids, learning about nature, reinforcement of earth-bonding. Chickens perform many functions, integrated with other animals, plants and systems, e.g., enrich soils, reduce pests, provide entertainment, clear weeds, prepare garden beds, dis-



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pose of food “wastes,” provide feathers for pillows, produce chicks, feed themselves, help to keep us sane and animal-sensitive. A source of pride in skill and self-sufficiency; we can provide ourselves with eggs, we take responsibility for this aspect of the homestead or community we run well. Looking after the poultry adds diversity to the day, reinforces cooperatives and associated community systems and skills.

Overheads: Insurance, debt, advertising, profit

Egg prices include the cost of all the avoidable overheads, including interest on all the debt carried by the corporations involved, along with the pyramided cost of all the advertising and insurance involved at all levels, the salaries of the corporate lawyers—and the outrageous CEO salaries—and the taxes and profits at all levels.

None. We can even produce and distribute eggs without any money.

System complexity, fragility, dependence

If the global economy falters, egg supply can be cut, along with jobs in the industry. Egg farms go bankrupt, poor people can't afford eggs. When eggs and food in general are sold to maximize corporate profit, the poor go hungry.

A simple, local system gives complete independence and security from the outside economy. We can go on providing ourselves with eggs no matter what. The poorest people can have secure access to eggs, and other food—if

These things can be produced at negligible cost from local resources...

they are not prevented by conventional “development” from getting the few basic resources needed such as land.

Eggs that are...

... always old, sometimes stale, contain dubious chemicals, produced by unhappy chickens, carrying a high embodied energy and resource cost ... and that cost money.

...perfect, fresh, pesticide-free, guilt-free, produced by happy chickens—and that cost no money at all.

The principle can be applied to most of the **basic** needs people have, e.g., for most other foods, housing (small earth-built dwellings), basic clothing, furniture, tools, toys, community buildings. These things can be produced at negligible cost from local resources by households and village cooperatives. Consider care of children and the aged when about 15 person-hours of care are wasted in the average

rich world household watching an electronic screen every day.

Just reorganize that resource and how much could be produced in cooperative gardens, craft centers, working bees, concerts... Capacities can be greatly increased if small amounts of national resources are allocated to development of small regional firms, i.e., by providing basic, simple machinery, timber, steel, glass, etc. for use by villages in building their infrastructures. (For poultry this includes little more than wire netting, wire and perhaps corrugated iron.)

...having people produce to meet their own needs outside the monetary economy is no good for people who have capital to invest...

Yet conventional development ignores all this and focuses on “getting the economy going,” i.e., trying to get local rich people or foreign corporations to invest in plantations and factories to produce luxuries to export to rich countries, drawing scarce resources into **inappropriate** development while creating very few, low-paid jobs for poor people... which they can then spend buying eggs ... from foreign owned supermarkets. This is of course “real” development because it does far more for the GDP than helping villages to set up poultry co-ops ... which would actually reduce the GDP because those people then would not be buying eggs ... anyone can see that's not development. Anyway, having people produce to meet their own needs outside the monetary economy is no good for people who have capital to invest and want as much buying and selling going on as possible ... or for those in rich countries who benefit most when poor countries put all their “development” effort into producing cheap minerals and consumer goods to export.

Thus conventional development enables **legitimate plunder**. Third world resources and products flow to rich countries and are not used to meet urgent local needs. Market forces are allowed to determine what is produced and who gets it, and because the rich can always pay more, they get almost everything and the poor go without, and the wrong things are developed.

Conventional development is capitalist development; it takes for granted that development cannot take place unless those with capital invest it in your region. This is a vicious myth; any region has abundant resources, rainfall, soils, labor, skills, with which simple technologies could meet most of the basic needs people there have, if these were applied directly to meeting those needs via mostly cooperative systems which did not allow profits to be siphoned out to the owners of capital. It is not the siphoning out that is most objectionable, it is the fact that capitalist development **never** develops the right things.

It is not being claimed that village cooperatives and traditional technologies are all that is needed. It

is being claimed that they can do miracles re meeting basic needs if that is enabled and facilitated. If state and national governments understood and accepted appropriate development they could with ease greatly increase effects by making sure that villages could get enough basic resources like that chicken wire.

Why don't Third World people, especially their governments, take the alternative path? The answer is (a) because of the almost complete dominance of the conventional growth-and-trickle-down conception of development, and (b) because they are **prevented** from doing these things by the rules imposed by Structural Adjustment Packages (and now "austerity" packages) which stipulate that national resources must go into paying off debt to rich world banks, not into meeting basic needs, let alone into purposes that would add nothing to the GDP. (See TSW website, Third World Development, <http://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/ThirdWorldDev.htm>)

Hence the core principle in The Simpler Way conception of development for rich as well as poor countries. It is to focus on developing Economy B, underneath the conventional economy, to enable

communities to take control of the development of their own local resources and capacities to produce as much for themselves as they reasonably can to meet their most urgent basic needs, in basically cooperative, non-profit and non-market ways. (For the detail see Trainer, 2010. For a summary of the alternative way see <http://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/tsw/TheAltSoc.lng.html>)

The top priority for people working in the "development" field should be to bust people out of the viciously deceptive conventional way of seeing development, to help them see how it exploits and deprives them and prevents development, to grasp that there is an alternative.

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Notes

1. B. Mollison, 1988. *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual*, Tyalgum, Tagari.
 2. T. Trainer, 2010. *The Transition to a Sustainable and Just World*, Sydney, Envirobook.
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