

Rod MacRorie asks whether this slogan offers real hope to the poor?

Sustainable Development

‘*You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last.*
(John 15:16)

The idea of ‘sustainable development’ has become an indispensable justification for modern missions working with an aid agenda. But what is meant by ‘sustainability’? Is it biblically significant? Is it relevant to what Christian development agencies are really doing? If not, why are we doing it? It was to challenge the economic dogma of the necessity of accelerating growth that Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere introduced the concept of ‘sustainability’ in 1974. This approach was adopted by the influential Brundtland Commission in 1987 and defined thus: ‘Sustainable development is development, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’¹

This new concept divided the theologians. The World Council of Churches at Nairobi (1975) took over Nyerere’s term, calling for a ‘just and sustainable society’ by means of empowering the poor.² They accepted the facts of limited local resources and the unlikelihood of mass social change, and sought how to live within the present system unchanged. Yet whereas many western development experts were still seeking to meet needs, many of their southern counterparts were questioning the concept of ‘development’ entirely. So-called ‘liberation theologians’ rejected the assumption that western culture could somehow be fitted into their own. The ‘trickle-down’ approach to aid was simply a means of keeping western donors in control and two-thirds world recipients dependent on them. ‘Development was not...a new word for peace, but another word for exploitation.’³

Christian agencies, under pressure from all sides, have generally responded by adopting the secular modernisation agenda, incorporating sustainable development. Thus Christian community development has been defined as ‘helping others help themselves’.⁴ But the holistic and person-centred emphasis of this concept became overshadowed by its economic implications. As programmes moved away from ‘economic growth’ as an aim, economic self-sufficiency became the perceived need, a necessary strategy, and eventually an end in itself. Once programmes had to rely exclusively on locally available resources, external costs could be reduced. Those charitable agencies with tight budgets became understandably attracted to this kind of ‘self help’. Thus it has been abused by some as an excuse for maintaining the

status quo, and by others as an excuse for cost-cutting. It has contributed to a climate of unilateral self-interest in donor and receptor countries rather than fostering mutual interests.

God Sustains

God’s sustaining activity is an essential attribute of his being as Father and Son. ‘The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.’⁵ The Fall, however, rendered his perfect creation unsustainable, a decay which affected human lifespan and his environment equally. ‘For the creation was subjected to frustration...in hope that the creation itself may be liberated from its bondage to decay.’⁶ This hope for liberation was not to be fulfilled by the human efforts of the people of God, but through God’s singular act of redemption through his Son. ‘He is before all things, and in him all things hold together...for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven...’⁷

The New Testament Greek word-family for ‘sustaining’ includes several different nuances that may help us assess its relevance to our discussion. ‘Sustaining’ can imply ‘staying put’ in one place, or ‘moving on’ unchanged. Staying metaphors include the frequent ‘abiding’, staying as a houseguest, or indeed, owning a property. Moving metaphors include ‘maintenance’ of hardware, or ‘persistence’ of an action. Jesus himself is supremely a man sustained by his relationship to God as Son to Father. This is anticipated in the messianic prophecies: ‘The Lord says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand...”’⁸; ‘sit’ is a ‘staying’ metaphor. John’s gospel emphasises the sustenance the Son derives from the Father. ‘I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me. The One who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone.’⁹ He calls upon others to enter the same sustaining relationship. ‘I pray...that all [believers] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be in us so that the world may believe...’¹⁰ We cannot endure on our own. We stand firm with him,¹¹ keep watch with him,¹² and stand with him in trials.¹³ Our future is rooted in our ongoing relationship in Christ. This truth is beautifully described in the metaphor of the vine in John 15:1-10 quoted in the introduction. We are sustained as branches of the vine (the Son), tended by the gardener (the Father), maintaining connections with others in a network of interdependent relationships.

KEY POINTS

One of the most pervasive concepts of modern mission development work is ‘sustainability’. Its appeal to western planners is matched by the creativity of programmes in developing countries to try to demonstrate sustainability in its work. In the process, what is meant by sustainability has become muddled and unhelpful. The Bible offers an alternative vision for ‘inter-dependency’, which emphasises sustainable relationships from both sides of the economic divide.

Mutual Society

Out of this central dependence on God, we are to reflect the same sort of sustaining relationship one with another. Jesus anticipated this in the relationship of evangelist and his audience, balancing giving in ministry with receiving in hospitality.¹⁴ Paul, despite a strong personal preference to sustain himself in difficult circumstances,¹⁵ appeared to submit to this reciprocal relationship.¹⁶ Only in this way could he be sustained in ministry against fantastic odds.¹⁷

We in turn are given the responsibility to build and maintain relationships as a means to sustainability. Our proud independence must be buried, to bear fruit in the continuing progress of the community.¹⁸ Sustaining relationships requires the compassion and insight of Jesus and to love in a durable way.¹⁹ We need to grow perseverance, hope and patience.²⁰ Then we shall be able to train in godliness, and comfort one another in adversity.²¹ It is always in the context of a sustained relationship with the living God.

The Bible is clear that this world is ultimately unsustainable. Society as we know it is in the process of passing away.²² The entire natural order is wearing out and will perish.²³ As the Creator made it, so he will dissipate it, leaving behind the sustained kingdom.²⁴ Concepts of sustainability based on natural or social order are thereby misleading.

A Way Forward

It is possible to identify a different approach to sustainability, based values of the kingdom Christ is building. Where do our development efforts fit into this alternative picture? Can our focus be shifted from independent communities to interdependent ones? People networks built between developed and developing countries, in which both sides respect each other's insights and assets. Bridges on which needs are mutual, where self-esteem not self-interest is promoted. In his appeal to help the Christians of Judea, Paul stressed the need for a balance of power in the relationship: 'At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality...'.²⁵ He looks beyond the current crisis towards a future sustained by a sharing of resources. He denies that charity is unsustainable: 'you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...'.²⁶

Such a change of focus will have implications for strategy and goals for development. 'The best way forward may not always be to try and ensure that the structures (and the organisation) that we set up continue. What is important is what happens in hearts and minds.'²⁷

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Such interdependence could contribute to what Taylor has called the 'integrity of development', in which complex interconnections facilitate the good development of all parties, seen in spiritual and cultural as well as socio-economic terms.²⁸

Sustainability is a confusing concept that has led Christian development work astray. Structures and activities will pass away, but sustained relationships between rich and poor, based on interdependency and mutual respect, is part of a biblical worldview. We must question aid efforts that seek fast finite results, and promote communication between individuals, churches, communities and governments. Our model should be the vine with its sustaining branches, fed by the root of faith in Christ and producing good fruit. 'Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'²⁹

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