The Basic Needs approach to development planning and mobilization has many early “fathers”. One was Mahatma Gandhi. His approach may be described as action oriented (the environment of domination and oppression was his laboratory), normative (the welfare of the poorest of the poor was his standard) and global (a non-violent world society was his ultimate goal).


A third collective “father” is the American “structural-functionalist” school of sociology with Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Marion J. Levy and David Apter as the leaders. For an analysis of structural-functionalism’s contribution to development approaches, see Ankie Hoogvelt *The Sociology of Developing Societies* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

It was the 1976 World Employment Conference of the International Labour Office which placed basic needs directly on the governmental world agenda. In the ILO presentation, basic needs were defined in terms of food, housing, clothing, and public services, like education, healthcare and transport. Employment was both a means and an end, and participation in decision-making was included.

The conclusions of the 1976 World Employment Conference state some of the requirements for satisfying human needs within one generation:

“Strategies and national development plans and policies should include explicitly as a priority objective the promotion of employment and the satisfaction of the basic needs of each country’s population...Often these measures will require a transformation of social structures including an initial redistribution of assets.

“The Programme of Action puts emphasis on the participation of the people, through organizations of their own choice in making the decisions which affect them... In view of the highly hierarchical social and economic structures of agrarian societies in some developing countries, measures of redistributive justice are likely to be thwarted unless backed by organizations of rural workers.”

The ILO report goes on to indicate two crucial elements in the Basic Needs approach:

“First, they include certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption: adequate food, shelter and clothing, as well as certain household equipment and furniture. Second, they include essential services provided by and for the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport and health, education and cultural facilities.”

The Basic Needs approach constitutes an attempt to come to grips directly with poverty in the fields of food, nutrition, health, education, and housing. It is predicated on a policy consisting of relatively high growth rates, redistribution of income, reorientation of investment and a review and modification of consumption and production patters.
A Basic Needs approach stresses the importance of the household as a basic institution. It is the household which allocates among its members incomes earned by members who are employed for wages, and it produces goods and services for its own use. Moreover, household activities play a crucial role in converting education, health and nutrition into improvements in the quality of life of individuals. By stressing the household, the Basic Needs approach comes close to reality and focuses on the family which has often been overlooked in development planning.

The ILO report stresses the importance of popular participation in development policies, especially of rural populations which are the least organized of workers. The report goes on to state “It is imperative for rural workers to be given every encouragement to develop free and viable organizations capable of protecting and furthering the interests of their members and ensuring their effective contribution to economic and social development.”(1)

The world employment program built upon an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what is employment by better analysis of the role of the informal sector in employment. The ILO Employment Mission to Kenya in 1972 presents the clearest definition of what the informal sector is, its importance to economic development, and its relationship to the formal, modern sector. The informal sector is characterized by:

- ease of entry:
- reliance on indigenous resources;
- family ownership of enterprises;
- small-scale operations;
- labor-intensive technology;
- skills usually acquired outside the formal school system;
- unregulated markets.(2)

In addition to the informal sector, the World Employment Conference stressed rural employment and the role of rural workers associations, subjects, more often considered in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

Rural workers’ organizations should represent the workers’ interests by engaging in planning development programs at local and national levels, providing an educational base for workers and in general mobilizing to improve the resources and services available to the workers as well as ensuring that social and economic development is responsive to the workers’ needs. Such groups of popular participation must not only breakdown old ways of doing things but must group human beings around new ways of doing them. Popular participation and the mobilization of the disadvantaged is an essential requirement of a Basic Needs approach to development. It is this requirement of popular participation that distinguishes a Basic Needs model of development from other kindred poverty eradication models.

The UN emphasis on basic needs is a good example of the role of the UN system in highlighting ideas and placing them on the agenda for action. As Richard Jolly, who has been working on a history of socio-economic ideas within the UN system, points out “The UN Intellectual History Project has identified four ways in which ideas have impact:

- By changing the ways issues or problems are perceived;
- By defining lines of action and agenda for policy;
- By altering the ways in which different groups perceive their own interests and thus influencing what ideas and policies they might support;
- By becoming embedded in institutions in ways which ensure implementation over the longer run.

The basic needs of the poor are often starkly apparent or amenable to easy discovery. The reason why basic needs are not met is that the poor cannot yet force an improvement in their condition, and the rich do not see it in their interest to grant new resources. Thus there needs to be a close link in the process by which needs are identified and the means by which needs may be met. Therefore one of the aims of the Coalition to Meet Basic Needs for Everyone is to build awareness and a momentum for action.

See the website: www.combe-online.org

Notes:


2. For a follow up with an emphasis on meeting basic needs, see: Dharam Ghai, Martin Godfrey, Franklyn Lisk. Planning for Basic Needs in Kenya (Geneva: ILO, 1979).