Indigenous Populations in a Cultural Perspective

The Paradox of Development in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. – Few development workers are genuinely convinced that the brave new world has much to learn from minor material cultures, apart from museum exhibitions, exotic dances, and folk performances. The idea of learning from "the other" appears outdated and is seldom founded on a notion of mutual exchange. Development implicitly pursues a process of homogenisation. Negotiation with "beneficiaries" is stipulated as a courtesy. The fashionable idea of "putting people first" does not fit well with prevailing socioeconomic imperatives, in spite of such concepts as participation and empowerment which give the false impression that development is in people's own hands. *[Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, highlanders, ideologies of change, development interventions, cultural perfusion, counterfeit participation]*

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Development perspectives in northeast Cambodia, south Laos, and the central highlands of Vietnam are a matter of sensitive concern for local governments as well as for international agencies. This region, which geographically corresponds to the semi-mountainous middle part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, is predominantly inhabited by highlanders[1] who, for years, have attracted particular attention of development agencies mainly because of geopolitical strategic reasons. In official agendas, material and economic improvements are promoted as vectors for a better quality of life than that which traditionally prevails in indigenous societies. The importance of material and economic status as indicators of well-being has systematically been, and still is, strengthened by a dominant idea stipulating the need to change vernacular outdated life conditions.

The article explores the current modes of intervention prevailing in the above region, with special attention to Ratanakiri Province in Cambodia (in the northeast). Some concepts, diplomatically welcomed, have enriched theories of social development and transformed classic top-down approaches in more comprehensive ways. But the forms in which those new ideas have been understood and effectively applied remain little discussed, at least in the region under consideration.

Our personal investigation tends to demonstrate that the alternative bottom-up and grassroot approaches initiated in the seventies and in the eighties by Amartya Sen (1970, 1999), Robert Chambers (1983, 1995) and Michael Cernea (1991), and consisting in "putting people first," does not fit well in the new architecture of aid, in spite of such concepts as participation, empowerment, and other keywords that give a false impression that development is in people's own hands. With a few remarkable exceptions, international aid agencies recognize that they have no choice but to comply with

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1 We call highlanders the indigenous populations sharing a similar historical and sociocultural foundation in contrast with the neighbouring people (Khmers, Laos, Kinhs).

globalisation, global governance, and, last but not least, policy reform promoting liberalisation, privatisation, and market mechanisms as the instruments of growth and efficiency. Agents of development subsequently face a certain incongruity in the process they entertain: once being aware of the local contexts and the social dynamics going on, and even once in favour of readjusting their orientations, many of them – not in the reports but through confessions or out of the office's time schedule – deplore the mainstream in which they are caught. In other words, development workers face difficulties distancing themselves from the unilateral trends to which they have to conform, even if they are strongly encouraged to show participatory methods along with other nonmonetary indicators.

In order to illustrate such discrepancy generating development workers' schizophrenic attitude, this research article scrutinizes the prevailing tendencies shaping the new negotiation roads which are supposed to accompany most of the interventions, and examines how these tools have been concretely implemented to date. Attention is given to the way the recent development concepts shaped the design and implementation of initiatives by development practitioners and some of the respective responses given by native populations. Short empirical case insights will be presented to elaborate on our arguments, also referring to other general studies with this goal in mind.

1 Successive Changes in the Conception and Application of Development

A plethora of books written by development professionals and social scientists from various disciplines have already prompted considerable reflection about the aims, relevance, and outcomes of socioeconomic development in southern countries. Manifestations and controversial ideologies have highlighted the necessity of development, without always clearly explaining its meaning. It has generally been understood as a quest for facilitating economic growth, social welfare, political freedom, and, more recently, ecological sustainability. Certain authors, particularly socioanthropologists, have pointed out the acuity of the approach when dealing with indigenous populations (Smith 1999), who are frequently referred to as minority groups even if they still constitute the demographic majority in a given territory.[2] It is on the other hand

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2 This is the case in Ratanakiri Province in Cambodia, but also in southern Laos and in the central highlands of Vietnam.

reasonable to assume that most of the populations in the South are similarly, but not identically, challenged by development. The purpose is not to enter into the ongoing debate concerning technical and social methodologies for development. There is no need to philosophize whether external interventions in the southern world should occur or not. They are already happening, and it is impossible to revert to the past. The critical question is how to deal with such intruding phenomena.

Thus, two aspects of development are going to hold our attention: firstly, we dissect speculative statements, which, though primarily based on Westernized visions of the world, have become explicitly integrated within some of the leading theories of development (including those which have largely remained theoretical). Some neglected areas, which are either given little importance or have been forgotten, are also considered. Second, development is a process which includes a chain of actors, such as international experts, national planners, decision-makers, nongovernmental organisations, and, more recently, representatives of local communities. All these social actors – and we refer to them as either social or political actors – affect the content and direction of development practice according to their convictions, ideologies, and actions. David Mosse once challenged a common sense declaring that models of project cycle management construct the implementation phase as a domain of routine, a world of rule-following subordinates that fall between the main acts (2005: 103). To put it in a few words, he argued that the involvement of organisations, either local or international, is more immediately shaped by what the author called their own system goals (that takes into account organisational maintenance and survival) than by formal priority goals of the programs supposed to improve the well-being of the beneficiaries. In the region under consideration below, it can be interpreted as if the so-called target indigenous populations turned into forgotten peoples.

2 Development Concepts Currently in Vogue in Relation to Indigenous Groups

The ideas detailed in this section are not merely restricted to the realm of the "improvement" of indigenous people in forest areas. Notions of participation and empowerment, for example, are currently promoted everywhere in the South, from urban cities to rural areas. Nonetheless, the present article concentrates its attention on the development ideologies and their associated interventions

which dominate amongst a number of indigenous societies which have sociocultural affinities and inhabit a particular geographical area. The territory under scrutiny in this work will occasionally be extended to show similar scenarios elsewhere: experiences in other locations with indigenous or local populations can be instructive.

Rather than formulating an exhaustive list of development-related concepts, the analysis aims at examining concepts which have become fashionable in Ratanakiri Province, a place selected which can be representative of a general situation in terms of development processes, but also a place, mainly the central plateau, which has been the location for recent academic research (J. White 1996; Bourdier 1995) and a tremendous amount of external interventions for the last ten years. Four prevailing notions associated with development will be reviewed: sustainability, self-governance, empowerment, and participation. A relative consensus has been established amongst development protagonists around these four notions which thus constitute the "hardcore" of development strategies in the province.

2.1 Sustainability

With regard to the first concept, the argument is that development interventions should be sustainable. Originally, the notion of sustainability emerged as a means of criticizing the predominance of economic growth as a development goal. It proposes a so-called alternative[3] perspective of development that is neither exclusively linked with economic growth nor with a productive model that automatically improves quality of life (Toussaint 2006). Sustainability has been primarily understood as a new paradigm to human development, founded on ecological awareness and the urge to protect nature. It initially emerged in the early sixties, convincingly proposed by experts (such as those who joined the Club of Rome) and scientists, such as René Dumont, whose compelling work on Africa resulted in the argument that the future of the planet will be compromised if economic growth remains the single priority. From the beginning, sustainability, however, had different definitions, from technical

inputs aimed at minimizing ecological losses, to the "extreme" notion of sustainability as presented by staunch ecologists (Le Bras 1994). In the analysis that follows it can be understood as an objective of perpetuating a process, be it economic, social, cultural, or environmental. Sustainability implies a form of development which enables present generations to fulfil their needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet theirs. Apart from the fact that the formula can be interpreted as inexorably true, evidence of small-scale sustainability remains partial and tenuous, depending largely on processes and opportunities, as defined by Sen,[4] rather than on the "convincing" evidence of outcomes.

In a "domino effect," in places such as northeast Cambodia, central Vietnam, and south Laos, sustainable development systematically and compulsorily appeared within official documents, and became a mainstream approach for international agencies, NGOs, and national governments that understood that they were required to be "environmentally correct" in order to receive funds and receive worldwide endorsement. As such, the concept of sustainability relies instead on a rough set of indicators that are not clearly articulated nor adequately measure sociocultural dynamics. Hence the question: What is it that is to be sustained? Is it the population or the project? In some contexts this question is less ambiguous. For example, the anthropologist Joanna White (1996: 28) mentions another definition of sustainability which she often comes across in Cambodia: for project benefits to be sustained after external support has been withdrawn.

Otherwise, definitions are often vague and elusive. Is sustainable development something aimed at benefiting all people, or only some? Do specific interventions transform social dynamics in a way which is welcomed by villagers or, conversely, result in the extended duration of projects which maintains a control over the population,[5] under the pretext of supporting, monitoring, and evaluating beneficiaries? As Mosse pointed out, are projects rendered sustainable primarily to benefit "developers" (2004), with the implementation phase going on forever in order to maintain the developers' presence (1994)?

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3 Some scientists argue that it is properly speaking not "alternative" as it has already existed earlier in some societies. In fact, many developers and even scientists have mindlessly (and sometimes cleverly) parroted the discourse of "sustainable development" as it is a trendy issue which scores people points for using it.

4 Sen's view of freedom includes both the processes that allow freedom of action and decision-making, and the actual opportunities that people have, given their personal and social circumstances (1999: 17).

5 Although this "control" is often the outcome, it is questionable whether it is a preconceived "aim" as such.

It is not certain that a society can intuitively properly understand and accept the notion of sustainability, in the form which is often introduced by development workers, if the latter do not have a proper cultural understanding of the local setting. Let us give one example not related to the environmental concerns with which sustainability is frequently associated but that demonstrates the primordial importance of cultural context. Once, in a number of Tampuan and Kreung villages in Ratanakiri (Cambodia), sustainability through self-reliance was dictated by development actors in an attempt to reduce people's dependence on the poor quality of local health services. As the state system functioned poorly, it was argued, villagers should learn to manage their own health care. Native people, both men and women, were required to learn basic elements of hygiene that, according to welfare specialists, was seriously lacking in the local setting. The first reaction was a certain perplexity amongst villagers whose knowledge and traditions were completely destabilized by this process. Most of their cultural beliefs were regarded as mere superstition by development practitioners. Both Tampuan and Kreung wanted to continue to perform sacrifices and observe their religious ceremonies for pacifying the spirits of the forest who, as they believed, were causing disease. Their own perception of sustainability was firmly rooted in this cosmology; their everyday lives were intrinsically founded upon the maintenance of relationships with cosmological and spiritual forces. They live in a world where their physical environment – the forest, water, rocks – is living and spiritually powerful, while in the Western modes of thought these facets of nature may be considered as something potentially valuable, but are perceived to be external and inanimate. Consequently, most villagers were unwilling to modify their behaviour and traditional practices as part of a process whereby they were supposed to learn about disease prevention and treatment. According to their indigenous beliefs, good health could not be achieved by the Western model alone. The causes of disease were fundamentally linked to social order and kinship relations, not merely with a lack of hygiene. Otherwise, as villagers argued, why do certain diseases affect this person and not another? The representation of health amongst such local people was socially rather than medically centred, which partially explains why people were happy to utilize also an external health institution that would, in all likelihood, treat the symptom but not the cause. Under such circumstances, indigenous people did not want to rely exclusively on themselves, as was

being promoted by development specialists. On the contrary, their priority was for the formal medical infrastructure to provide improved and more accessible services. They preferred to delegate aspects of health treatment which they did not manage well (provision of drugs, medical diagnosis, physical check up) to this system, while maintaining control of the other, most important aspect of the origin of the sickness, which involved reestablishing equilibrium with the spirits through sacrificial appeasement. On the one hand, they wanted to continue following their traditions – a preference generally frowned upon by outsiders who considered traditional beliefs nothing more than superstitions and obstacles to development that deserved to be eradicated. On the other hand, villagers were willing to strategically accept certain benefits offered by modernisation. The lesson is that a proper implementation of a viable project should have articulated those two existing considerations. At the same time, while development experts thought that creating "self-reliance" would solve the problem on both sides (for natives and the development experts themselves as they would look politically correct for enacting this measure), it backfired because of this lack of vision.

2.2 Self-Governance

With regard to the second concept, self-governance is a politically correct approach which has been promoted with the aim of minimising external interference and control. To the worst, it means that populations should reappropriate their destiny through collective decision-making and choice of options. At the micro level in Cambodia and Vietnam, the situation is more than ambiguous, specifically in the region predominantly inhabited by "primitive people," whose territory lowland Khmers and Vietnamese have long coveted (Guérin et al. 2003). With the concept of self-governance comes the notion of endogamous development. While the concept is often supported by project documents, it is scarcely supported in practice in Ratanakiri, or in neighbouring provinces and countries inhabited by indigenous people. Condominas (1957, 1971) and Dournes (1980), both of whom lived amongst ethnic groups in the central highlands of Vietnam for extended periods, demonstrated that in the absence of any federation system the village was the highest political and social unit amongst indigenous communities. Even when extravillage sociopolitical relationships existed within groups such as the Jarai (Dournes 1977), the sym-

bolic power attributed to charismatic individuals – the three *sadet* – could not be compared with the concept of political power prevalent in other societies. Indeed, the village as an autonomous and coherent unit still persists in remote areas in Laos (Condominas 1965) and in Cambodia (Bourdier 1998). Moreover, this atomised structure is not unique to the region but existed in South America (Clastres 1974), the Pacific Islands (Sahlins 1980), and in many other Asiatic territories such as the Philippines (Conklin 1957). It is more appropriate to use the past tense to describe these autonomous systems because they have been placed under considerable pressure by colonial powers and national governments to become integrated within the administrative structures of a wider society. They were frequently obliged to conform to an organisational process that was used to "pacify" them in colonial times, and thereafter "domesticated" them, to borrow a phrase from McCaskill and Kampe (1997), under the pretext of an effective implementation of socioeconomic improvements.

Under such circumstances, how can development professionals continue to promote the idea of self-governance (regardless of indigenous development which is another issue) if they have been complicit in attempts by state and bilateral agencies to diminish the previous strength and autonomy of the village as a coherent unit? Indeed, the autonomy of villages was always their strength. While it is not possible to rewrite history, it is worth noting that the systematic undermining of village autonomy continues. In the province of Ratanakiri, many villages have been virtually erased from the map or, at best, have survived merely with the remains of the so-called development initiatives devoted to "leadership programs" which have not resulted in the emergence of authentic leaders devoted to the community but, rather, in the appearance of corrupted impostors. As a result of such initiatives, most attempts to strengthen villages have been futile, if not counterproductive. Creating artificial gatherings, organising village group meetings, and establishing intervillage networks amongst selected people are neither logical nor attractive propositions for most villagers, except for those who may be able to extract personal prestige, economic advantage, or social recognition from such undertakings. In one particular district, it was directly observed that families and individuals who managed to obtain such privileges by no means represented the interests of their village. Thus, a social rupture was created as a result of promoting presumed self-governance. The actions of individuals who are provided with the opportunity to enhance their power as village

"representatives" have been counterproductive to the general welfare of their community and, on many occasions, have strengthened the privileges of either their own relatives and clan or families with whom they have economic and ceremonial connections.

2.3 Empowerment

Empowerment is a further consideration. It is an esoteric and fascinating word, associated with capacity-building. It will never be rejected because it symbolizes the opposite of vulnerability and is considered a prerequisite for participation. It generally appears as a first step in development projects which claim to act against discrimination and marginalisation. It is regarded as a nonmonetary indicator of well-being. Theoretically, the empowerment of an endangered society would represent an ideal stage of realisation of its own condition (J. White 1996). In Ratanakiri we observed that other social functions have been promoted under the auspices of empowerment: capacity-building and social strengthening. Deeper scrutiny is required in order to understand how a consensual concept can be diverted from its original intention.

An example: In a village, near the small capital of Ban Lung, there was an attempt to explain to local residents how to protect their land, and on what basis villagers could either prevent or allow outsiders to cut trees in their communal forests. This exercise was totally justified, as land issues are one of the most sensitive topics in the province. The alarming extent of land appropriation has been highlighted by local human rights groups, and by the main NGO monitoring land evolution on an annual basis (*NGO Forum* 2006). It was, therefore, completely reasonable to inform the indigenous population about their rights and to make them aware of whom they could turn to in situations of conflict. Meetings were arranged, and those who attended were able to ask questions. The assembly was supposed to represent the village, and attendees were expected to share the information which was imparted to other villagers who, for various reasons, were not in position to attend. In fact, the group was not as representative as planned. Questions related to local governance were apparently neglected. Heads from the government administrative system including village chiefs, commune leaders, and district headmen attended, together with other middle-aged people and young adults. All of them were farmers who had already obtained the most coveted portions of land border-

ing on, or close to, the main road. With one fortunate exception, neither women nor poor farmers participated. They had simply not been invited. The encounter could, in fact, be understood as an exclusive meeting, limited to an emerging elite who had managed to secure new areas of land, frequently at the expense of the poorest families. Those who were more in need to be instructed on the basic procedures to be followed in cases of land expropriation, or other inappropriate use of their natural environment, were not present. Their absence was not because of their lack of interest but because the organisers of the meeting, together with some of the wealthier leaders of the village, considered it "too late" to include them; while for some leaders, a representative participation was "not necessary." Hence the regular meetings empowered the already empowered and widened the gap within the so-called community. The village was no longer – and had probably never been – an ideal community sharing similar ideas, strategies, and perceptions of life. But any existing tension became exacerbated by the selective sharing of information. It was found that some of the "empowered" villagers were trying to appropriate areas of forest located in other villages for their own use. With the information they obtained during the "empowerment" activity, and due to the continuous support they received from the development staff (probably unaware of what was happening), they knew exactly how to manipulate and negotiate with other villagers to secure land without compromising themselves.

This experience is far from unique. Other similar cases cannot, however, be classified as an internal issue amongst highlanders. Khmer officials working in the public sector at district and provincial levels are sometimes establishing networks with villagers who are willing to sell land (generally forbidden since 2001) in exchange for symbolic privileges, cash, or other material goods. As detailed in a similar case study from India, government staff is able to exploit their official role in their negotiations with village intermediaries. The latter are more capable of taking advantage of their fellow villagers or "inmates" (Hildyard et al. 2001), thereby any development initiative initially aimed at benefiting all villagers can lead to the exacerbation of existing inequalities. Interestingly, some villagers from Ratanakiri who did not receive any benefits from the project detailed earlier, yet who attended some meetings, were surprised that the empowerment session was evaluated according to the number of people participating, rather than the social distribution of the people present or the impacts of this initiative.

Unsurprisingly, quantitative data are emphasised in development because they can easily be transformed into the targets and indicators of achievement required by most donors. The recipients of funding are obliged to generate data, statistics, and percentages. There are numerous economic and development models which are dedicated to measurement and evaluation and insist on numbers. We will not digress into these details here, but one has to wonder whether development agents should be satisfied with such measurements: What does it mean to have "empowered" more than one hundred adolescents in four indigenous villages through literacy training, for example, if no comprehensive details are known about the quality of and concrete outcomes of this so-called empowerment? Henkel and Stirrat (2001) similarly question the notion of empowerment as an implicit, liberating motto which has recently, and suddenly, been promoted by the World Bank, NGOs, and local institutions. Hence, empowerment can be considered as a controlled outcome designed by external agents in order to enhance the capacity of a handful of individuals, often to the detriment of others. This is certainly the case of some village administrative leaders in Ratanakiri, who are in command of their actions and wooed by civil servants, but who do not represent the interests of the whole village (through their sale of land, leasing of village territory to non-indigenous people, etc.). The new development orthodoxy which stresses empowerment of marginal groups, a distrust of the state, and celebrates indigenous knowledge still begs an important question: it is not important how many people have been empowered with a particular set of tools, but for what purpose? Theories of empowerment cannot be separated from the application and meaning of this concept in a specific setting. Of course, other forms of empowerment have been promoted with better success in other parts of the region, in Laos and Vietnam, but, according to prevailing fieldwork information, they are far from homogeneously reaching the remote Indo-Chinese territory of Southeast Asia inhabited by more than ten thousand highlanders.

2.4   Participation

The best has been kept as a birthday cake for the end. Participation is nowadays an act of faith in development, something all practitioners profoundly believe in and rarely question (Cleaver 2001: 36). The concept is closely linked to that of empowerment. Two social scientists already men-

tioned, Robert Chambers and Michael Cernea, who worked for the World Bank as anthropologists, were the leading pioneers of this notion even if other scientists such as Sen first proposed it some time earlier (1970). Both devoted much of their professional lives to demonstrating the necessity of a grassroots approach in which local people are the main actors. They were instrumental in a monumental switch from the classic top-down approach which prevailed in the seventies and into the eighties. Participation has even been presented as a new paradigm for development (Chambers 1995), but with careful qualifications of which any proponent of development should be aware if s/he is to avoid the risk of transforming the message of participation into a tool for manipulation.

In Ratanakiri, the concept of participation certainly merits greater scrutiny. Numerous villages have attempted to take their destiny into their own hands (and some have succeeded), due to the desire of villagers to work together as a cohesive group. Given traditional village cooperation, the notion of participation is not something totally new in the highlands. It could, as some development agents argue, be more accurately termed collective action aimed at enhancing social well-being (Smith 1999). Such collective action is prompted by the potential it offers for improving people's living conditions and often emerges in response to social change. For instance, Tampuan and Jarai families of all lineages traditionally joined together in social, seasonal, and religious ceremonies. Historical and social circumstances gradually led them to abandon some rituals or add innovative components to their ceremonies and to their agricultural work. Whatever their purposes, both these behavioural and spiritual practices are supposed to maintain peace, solidarity, and guarantee better living conditions. Other examples could be given in relation to other activities, such as the selection of seeds for new plants, cash crop farming, experimental marketing strategies, the adjustment of customary laws to new social contexts, collective decision-making, and mobilization in relation to the improvement of village infrastructure. Populations gather together and share ideas. They unite, exchange, and innovate. They can also fail to cooperate, but not always. Hence indigenous people have never required the presence of development actors to enable them to understand and to exercise what outsiders call "participation" (or, rather, what they often really mean: an oriented action driven by external forces).

In fact, development workers, even some academicians and decision-makers, have a distinct definition of participation. Broadly speaking, it relates to something which can be proposed, articulated, and organized in cooperation with the local population for a specific purpose. It implies, therefore, a certain level of external intervention. Participation is generally interpreted by development practitioners as something new for local populations who are generally considered to be structurally too weak and/or inexperienced to initiate constructive and innovative activities alone. When looking more closely, however, participative mechanisms within people's daily lives are largely available. One should have a keen eye and the time to identify them. Development interventions which are introduced from outside do not occur in a vacuum. Any culture has the tools to enable innovative activities, according to their own sociocultural logic and context. But these phenomena should be deciphered before new forms of behaviour and modes of thinking, often alien to indigenous mores, are introduced. Highlanders' perceptions of participation are intrinsically linked, but not restricted, to an existing and well-organized spirit of collective action such as that which prevails for instance in northeast Cambodia.

Participation is appealing in the context of the official development doctrine for two reasons. On the one hand, development is no longer a unilateral process but one of negotiation. Target populations are no longer perceived as mere recipients. Rather, through the articulation of their views and their own practices, they re-appropriate their own development. It is, however, anticipated that through the process of negotiation they will ultimately absorb some development norms. They will understand development as a necessity and, hence, become instrumental in their own transformation. But as Apthorpe pointed out, such a discourse aims to persuade rather than to inform (1997). Participation is an element or tool of the hidden agenda of deliberate economic and social change which is implemented through a process of persuasion. On the other hand, it is assumed that participation has a snowball effect: once people appreciate the advantages of a particular set of successful actions, further demands are automatically created. The trickle-down effect is implicitly expected. One of the problems is that the glorification of decision-making and actions being in people's hands is vague enough to be universally accepted, with yet full of hypotheses which deserve careful scrutiny. In their precise questioning of participation as a potentially oppressive approach, Cooke and Kothari (2001) highlighted two issues which are well known to practitioners of participation but generally neglected in implementation strategies. Systematic partic-

ipatory processes can turn out to be manipulative and may harm those who were supposed to be empowered, but who, in fact, become development mediators. Various examples are cited in their book. In short, the authors insisted that considering participation as a must is a reductive approach. They do not agree with the preconceived idea that local populations have a tendency to remain out of the control in pursuit of their own welfare. In case they contribute by "participating" according to Western aid standards, they are not free to do and think as they please because they lack know-how, and aid workers have to show them the right direction.

Other severe drawbacks remain, such as the bureaucratic and administrative effects which hamper the autonomy and self-determination. In large projects, indigenous people are requested, if not compelled, to participate in whatever external decision-makers would like them to do, even if the benefits are not always clear. While some authors and most of the multilateral agencies have proclaimed the virtues of participative processes, without any scrutiny or discussion, a revealing analysis in Lesotho confirmed what had already been analysed elsewhere, namely, the futility of participatory development activities once they reach "the field" in comparison to the heavy logistical operations devoted to organizing a very abstract notion of development that hardly reaches stakeholders (Ferguson 1990). Paradoxically, participation becomes the central concern of development agencies, which enables them to demonstrate that they are appropriately involved in contributing to the well-being of others and also ensures continued funding for their work.

An illustration of the perversion of participation brings us back to Ratanakiri, where many of the errors outlined above occurred in a huge project launched in 1995 under the auspices of UNDP, in partnership with the national government. One of the purposes of the project, in which some employees were Khmers, yet where the majority of managers and advisers were foreigners, was to change natural resource management practices, deemed degrading the environment, and to create an awareness of sustainability issues amongst the local population, regardless of their ethnic background or their geographical origin. The ambition of the international organization, in its collaboration with the provincial authorities, was to prevent the monopolization of land, to preserve indigenous culture by attempting to eliminate what was "threatening" to development, to improve the status of women, promote better healthcare, and to support improved infrastructure.

After conducting an extremely rapid and superficial social evaluation of various selected zones in the province (with Rapid Assessment Procedures), several pilot villages were chosen. The evaluation that aimed to appraise the situation of each village was conducted by a team of fifteen people who arrived in each hamlet in a Land Rover, armed with a battery of questionnaires which were used to ask people about their needs, aspirations, problems, and frustrations. Highly conceptualized communication techniques were adopted in order to collect as much information as possible in a short period of time and to stimulate communication with some chosen villagers. Cultural factors were, of course, a concern for the development actors involved, in the sense that some cultural aspects of indigenous life could be perceived as obstacles to development and, thereby, had to be rejected in the interest of and for well-being of the target populations. The integration of cultural issues in project planning was vague and inscrutable, reflecting a lack of understanding on the part of the outsiders. Worse, one can well imagine that any attempt to identify what was "good" or "bad" in relation to development was rather adventurous and would lead to an artificial separation of values whose meanings were not fully understood. It is also not certain that those in charge of the project were informed about traditional perceptions and knowledge pertaining to the local use and management of nature. Rhetorical statements, aimed at promoting ecological knowledge as a "cultural heritage" were prominent, however, and the use of fashionable and catchy phrases (unity in diversity, preservation of indigenous natural wealth, legacy from the past . . .), which pleased donors and opened an illusory door for a democratic provincial government, was encouraged. Unfortunately, words alone proved to be insufficient. Development actors and civil servants may have been aware that it is not advisable to ignore the traditional knowledge of indigenous people living in forest areas; long-term scientific research has already demonstrated the need to incorporate local populations in any system of eco-management (Hladik et al. 1996). But there is an inevitable gap between awareness and the capacity to apply this awareness to the practical purposes of a development program. Astonishingly, time and means were frequently cited as limiting factors (it is not realistic or cost-effective to devote too much time to local people's values); instead, attention was focused on what had to be achieved, and methods of project implementation were emphasized in order to gain the support of local people. In other words, the objectives of the project were predefined and its im-

plementation took the form of a normative strategy, without any genuine possibility of questioning or discussing the underlying ideology.

Nonetheless, everything was carried out under the banner of participation. In one instance it took a cynical turn, when villagers in the northern part of the province were displaced "for their own sake" and forced to construct a small road connecting their new and inappropriate location to a nearby river. This activity was classified as a "food for work" participatory initiative from which people would obtain significant benefits. In fact, the road attracted non-indigenous traders, and it has been helping loggers to reach primary forests containing precious trees.

This long and costly development initiative employed many development agents, and hence probably provided financial return benefits, at least for these individuals. But after a number of years of activities, the program scarcely achieved its intended goals. Despite the lack of proper oversight and evaluation, it may, without any doubt, be considered a failure, as the indigenous people involved almost unanimously recognize that their lives progressively deteriorated during the course of the program.

3   En Route to a Recurrent Process

Tracing the links between development and social change, Karl Polanyi had been one of the first analysts of the 1940s to highlight the political and economic origins of the great transformation that led to the collapse of 19th-century civilisation. He argued that the emergence of an international market that would force human beings to adjust to economic forces could not take place without eradicating the human and natural foundations of society, without destroying the essence of mankind and transforming the environment into a desert (1983). His analysis, however, does not fully capture the impact of modernization, and he could not foresee the development policies as inherent part of the game, but it provides a prophetic vision if applied to the contemporary world: a global and irreversible movement has been created.

Rejecting what can be called Polanyi's apocalyptic analysis, other innovative theories related to the concept of complex systems classify the development movement into four successive phases: crisis, rupture, resilience, and equilibrium. Such ideas have been taken into account in Southeast Asian countries, and even exceedingly applied in the recent past by totalitarian regimes. The proposition is that the responses of indigenous societies to socioeconomic change could also be viewed according to this theoretical continuum. Interestingly, this apparently recent theory is not new: it is rooted in the Hindu conception of the evolving life cycle, whereby deconstruction leads to another form of advanced creation. Contemporary scientists and developers are, therefore, rediscovering ideas which were meticulously shaped by philosophers more than three thousands years ago. On the other hand, the concept of complex systems validates the controversial shock doctrine of neoliberal economist Milton Friedman who argues for the need to impose rather than to deliberate and strive for a global consensus (Klein 2007). According to Friedman, whose statements became – and still constitute – the "Bible" for powerful countries and regimes, a solution, whatever its purpose to save all of humanity, will never be accepted by all societies and cultures, unless the latter are in a state of shock. In other words, populations will accept a deal related to a particular orientation of development, for instance, only if they have previously suffered a socioeconomic disaster and are in a state of panic. In some cases, such debacles have to be provoked in order to generate an agreement. But these so-called accommodating responses that other scientists have disguised behind the phenomenon of "resilience" leading to a further equilibrium are ethically difficult to justify. And they are far from the esoteric and attractive Hindu and Buddhist notion of life evolution.

Besides, and coming back to the appealing inclination of integrating the indigenous populations in their own development, the notion of national governance is an essential component with which outsiders have to deal carefully. Multilateral agencies and NGOs cannot operate unilaterally, even if sometimes they would, in fact, prefer to work without the permanent control of local governments. The "golden age" of independent operations is over, as some of the development actors active in Cambodia and Laos reported with regret. International agents now have to negotiate with local planners and public servants. Each country, therefore, has its own particular "filter" whereby its national institutions reappropriate and reorient foreign aid. Again, much can be said regarding the differences which occur between the absorption and the use of foreign assistance in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It stems from complex institutional interactions in which diplomatic, bilateral agreements and foreign policy components are tightly intertwined.

Moreover, development agencies are run by social actors and, needless to say, the outcomes of

any intervention are conditioned by the nature and quality of the involvement of these actors. Another underestimated aspect of development issues is that certain professionals misuse their position, adding to the implicit constraints (logistical, monetary, organisational, hierarchical, and political) which prevail within the institutions employing them. More than ten years of continuous presence and observations in southern countries prompted me to put into question the common discourse calling for development actors' sincere devotion. It is not exaggerated to perceive their main role as strategic: development personnel are frequently driven by their own ambitions and are more concerned with enjoying a comfortable standard of living rather than devoting themselves to ameliorating problems of others, as they should be (Dichter 2003; Hancock 1989). To a certain point this behaviour is understandable; everyone likes to live comfortably. But more worrisome is that – in the hidden agenda – development actors' real priority is the pursuit of their own personal and material well-being (Harvey 2003). For example, monitoring of certain development activities in Cambodia has revealed that the exclusive interests of government officials have a major impact on rural development efforts. Everybody is aware of this fact, even NGOs and multilateral agencies, but the subject remains taboo because criticising institutions and individuals may affect careers and an agency's reputation after being accused of excessive interference. Opportunistic, insincere technocrats and self-centred officials can be found in senior positions in many agencies. Not only do they impede development efforts, but it is also not easy to get rid of such "experts" because of their solid underground networks and prestigious positions. But most of all, aid agencies will systematically try their best to avoid any exposure of their insensitive practices and behaviours. Such an apparently inconsistent but, in fact, very well-planned situation is reproduced throughout the whole ex-Indo-Chinese peninsula.

Unsurprisingly, postdevelopment is now advocated through an emerging network of small organisations willing to implement a real alternative in the way projects are designed. A shift is suggested, inspired by Escobar's theoretical perspectives (1995), sometimes with another concept of nondevelopment arguing "let them alone and protect them from the outside," but it is unclear whether this approach, to some extent already taking place in Brazil with a well-elaborated indigenous policy model, can encompass the outlook of local peoples. Again, postdevelopment and, even more, antidevelopment theories are social constructions elaborated by academicians and external actors, projecting their personal ideologies and convictions. They have not been systematically validated by local populations. This is not to say that the borrowing of ideas is in itself unacceptable, and this brings us back to the initial problem: do indigenous people have control over their destiny and can they retain the freedom to respond to events occurring in their life? Rather than tackling this problem in a roundabout way, Rivero adopted a radical but contextual approach (2001) by pointing to the relevance of an approach including people's visions of development. A positive move forward can, therefore, be undertaken through identification of some parallel economies, which exist in various parts of the world, and attempts to understand how these are embedded within particular sociocultural dynamics. Similarly, one of the founders of this school of thought, Wolfgang Sachs, advocated for self-determination (1992). He adopted a flexible approach, insisting on people's creativity as well as asserting that it is neither realistic nor ethical to deny people access to the decision-making process in what concerns changes occurring in their society. It is imperative that local citizens make a proper contribution to and, thereby, take responsibility for their own future. In that context, the four concepts analysed before – sustainability, self-governance, empowerment, and participation – may have a real meaning, the one which was once upon a time advocated by Amartya Sen.

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