The Need to Sustain Benefits of Development Practice

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1. Introduction

Most development practitioners may like to have a lasting impact on the welfare of people. Even if the support is provided to people for food or clothing, we may like to see that those whom we have helped do not end up in the same vulnerable situation again. In one sense, this is captured by the old Chinese saying, `Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime'. However, ensuring this long-run welfare is not that easy. It requires rational thinking and preparedness.

As part of development actions, we may create an asset – a new school, a hospital, or a toilet for girls in a government school – which is expected to be useful for a period of time, for example, a school toilet for five to ten years; a newly created public hospital building for at least 15 to 20 years. But do such assets, created as part of a development action, function well during their expected lifetime? It is not unusual to see many newly-created assets that are part of governmental or non-governmental interventions failing to provide benefits much before the end of their expected lifespan? This issue requires special attention and it is the focus of this essay.

In general, it is relatively easy to create an asset or implement a project – construction and implementation can be hired or outsourced. However, this will not ensure that the asset will function well as long as it lasts. Ensuring this requires additional efforts and maintenance. If a toilet is built for school children but becomes unusable within a few months or years due to the lack of water supply or regular cleaning, there are no benefits from this intervention.

The example of a school toilet is given here to highlight the fact that maintenance is not a simple job even for such a simple and relatively cheaper asset. In fact, the maintenance of such an asset is more complex than its creation. Extensive planning is required for this purpose. For example, the toilet should have a regular water supply from a source of water. A reliable source of water like a well or pipeline has to be identified and connected to the toilet. In certain cases, water may have to be lifted (or pumped out) on a regular basis. For which electricity is required (which may not be required for lights since, ordinarily, a school toilet is not used after dark). Hence, besides an electricity connection, there has to be, more importantly, a system for paying electricity tariffs regularly so as to ensure continued power supply. There has to be money allocated and disbursed for this purpose without delays. Someone is required to clean the toilet and it has to be ensured that this job is done well and on a daily basis. The cleaning staff needs to be paid a salary. So, there has to be a regular stream of income for maintaining an asset as simple as a school toilet.

How do we ensure this allocation of money and that it reaches the person who has to spend it, on time? An altruist may be interested in funding the construction of a toilet, but is he/she interested in providing the money for its maintenance? Can there be a charge for students who use the toilet in a school, like the `pay and use' toilets at a railway station? If a user charge is not desirable and/or not enough to generate adequate income to maintain the toilet, then the school should have enough additional income from other sources for this purpose. When the source of the fund is identified, the next step is to ensure that the money reaches the person who has to disburse it (probably, the Head Teacher) on time. If there is a delay in this, the cleaning staff may stop coming and soon the toilet will become unusable. Similarly, it may become unusable if water is not available due to the disconnection of power supply because of the non-payment of electricity dues. Avoiding these is not simple.

There are two dimensions to the problem of maintaining an asset. First is the availability of adequate money for maintenance by ensuring that the intervention has a revenue stream to meet its operating expenditure until it lasts. Secondly, there has to be an institutional system for maintenance. Taking the toilet example, there has to be a way to ensure that the assigned staff cleans the toilet regularly. Who will ensure this? We may expect that the Head Teacher or one of the teachers will do this supervision. But will they have an interest in ensuring that the children's toilet is clean if they have a separate toilet for themselves? It is not unusual to see a toilet kept locked for the use of teachers and the one meant for students poorly maintained. If the Head Teacher or the teacher-in-charge of supervising the work is not doing the job well, is there a way for somebody else (higher government officials from the education department, parents or the altruist who funded the construction) to intervene? These issues related to the institutional or organizational matters of implementation and maintenance can be discussed in another note. We consider the issue of financial resources for maintenance in detail in the following section.

2. Money for maintenance

As mentioned earlier, there is a need to ensure that adequate money is available throughout the life of a project to meet the recurring costs of providing the service and to carry out periodical repairs and maintenance. This is especially so if the intervention is not a one-time activity, like organizing a training session for school teachers for a few days. When there is a continuation of the program or a continued operation of an asset created as part of a development intervention, financial sustainability is an important concern. Many altruists may consider (for different reasons) that their responsibility is to fund the capital costs for creating the asset, while the maintenance should be taken over by the users. But thinking about who will maintain and ensuring that it happens are important aspects to be considered, otherwise, the capital asset created through the goodwill of the altruist may crumble and come to nought.

It may be possible to have a user-charge to meet the operating costs and there is merit in doing so where possible. An altruist can create a gym in his residential colony, and a user charge can be collected to meet its maintenance costs. But in some cases, user charges are neither feasible nor desirable. A toilet in a rural school could be a typical example. A charge for using a toilet at a railway station may not be impractical or undesirable, but in a rural school, this may not be the case. Parents who cannot afford it may be discouraged from sending their children to school, which can lead to socially harmful consequences.

The other reason is that it may be difficult to charge a fee for certain services. If a person arranges to clean the public space in front of his house, it may be difficult for him to collect user charges even to meet a part of the cost. In the case of a street light, it would be costly to exclude some people from enjoying the benefit of it. Or, if we do not want a public park to be enjoyed by persons who have not paid a user fee, there should be a compound wall, a security guard and a toll gate. Therefore, in certain cases, the revenue from user fees may not be sufficient to meet all the expenditure required for maintenance of an asset.

In the provision of what can be called ‘private goods’ where one person’s consumption reduces the availability of the same items for others and where excluding the non-payer is not so costly, charging a user fee is not difficult. This is desirable, especially if the people who avail of such a service can afford the service. A typical example is the piped water supply that is connected directly to households. If this water supply is provided by a community organization (funded by an altruistic or governmental agency), there may be the need for other sources of income to meet the recurring cost for its maintenance (for pumping water, to pay the salary of the person who pumps the water regularly, and also to carry out periodic repairs etc). It is not easy to get grants for such recurring costs. The maintenance of a water-supply system can be very difficult without adequate money available on time. Hence, there is some merit in mobilizing at least a part of the expenditure through charges from the users. Moreover, if people do not have to spend money for water, they may not be careful with the system or the use of water. Hence, the user charge may determine the use of (or the demand for) water, which is not surprising since user charge is a price, and as price changes, demand may also change for many commodities. This impacts the project design. For example, the design of the size of the project (that is the amount of water to be treated and supplied) should be based on the demand for water, and here the potential range of water charges has to be considered to know the approximate amount of water demanded. With zero or no charges, huge quantities may be demanded and used, subsequently, the size of the project to meet that requirement could be higher. If such a project is created and the decision to impose a charge is taken after its implementation, then a significant capacity of this project may not be utilized. Hence, the desirability and range of charges have to be a major concern as part of the design of a project. If a charge is not imposed or is found to be undesirable, a normative fixation of the quantum of water to be distributed may be necessary for the design. For water supply, there are norms like 120 litres per capita, per day. After the implementation, certain rationing mechanisms may be used to see that consumers limit their consumption within this normative limit. In such a case, the piped water supply may not be extended to individual houses. Only public water taps may be provided so people have to queue up at public taps and have to carry water to their houses. This inconvenience (queuing for and carrying water) may discourage them from taking more quantities than they require for their basic needs. Therefore, such rationing mechanisms are a substitute for the price or charge for those services which are provided free, so as to discipline or limit the consumption.

There is another issue related to the user charge, especially if it is charged as a way to mobilize revenue for meeting the costs of the provision. Let us assume that the community organisation needs to have a higher revenue to meet the increased expenditure for maintenance, and hence it decides to increase user-charges for the water supply. As the charge increases, some people may reduce the consumption substantially so that they don’t have to incur higher expenditure. If most consumers are of this type, there will not be a significant increase in the revenue of the project. So, if higher revenue mobilization is the objective, the way to do it is to increase charges for those consumers who are less likely to reduce the consumption and not for those who are more likely to do so. This can be tricky in certain cases. Continuing with the same example, poorer consumers who are taking only the minimum quantity of water cannot reduce their consumption further even if the charge goes up. On the other hand, the consumption of relatively well-to-do sections of society could be over and above their basic needs. They may be able to reduce the consumption when the tariff goes up or use substitutes like water-saving devices. In such a context, the operationalization of the rule mentioned above – charge more for those who do not reduce consumption and do not increase the charge for those who may reduce consumption – may work against the poor and favour the better-off sections of the society.

If user charges are neither desirable nor feasible, the proponents of a project (say, the development practitioners) should ensure that there is adequate money for the operation and maintenance. Delays in the disbursements of payments may affect maintenance and lead to the non-availability of the service and the degeneration of the assets created. It would impact the effectiveness of the intervention since the expected service cannot be availed of. A substantial number of assets created as part of the development actions do not lead to adequate benefits for the intended population during the expected period because of this problem.

A not-for-profit hospital which can charge only very low fee (due to the poverty status of intended beneficiaries) may be financially unviable but is socially beneficial (by considering the losses that people suffer in the absence of a health facility.) Hence, it is desirable to have such a hospital; however, it is almost certain that this hospital would become financially unsustainable since it will not be able to generate enough revenue through the charges paid by patients alone to meet all its costs. There have to be efforts towards getting additional income from other sources like funding from charitable organizations to ensure that the hospital is not only socially beneficial but also financially viable. This shows the importance of financial analysis in addition to social analysis for all such interventions. These interventions should generate not only net social benefits but also sufficient revenues to meet all paid out costs. So, if revenue from users is neither possible nor desirable, there should be a provision for mobilizing funds timely from charitable or other sources. Financial analysis should clearly indicate these sources and the timing of such funding.

The lack of attention to maintenance could be due to different reasons. People who carry out such interventions may quite often be interested only in creating assets. They may want to boast of the asset they have created but may not be keen on its maintenance and operation because the creation of an asset is a visible intervention while its maintenance is not. Asset creation is often done through contractors and there is a tendency to use the money that is available to meet the fixed costs (to create the maximum visible asset) leaving little for maintenance.

3. Helping people to help themselves

Coming back to the message of the Chinese saying on the virtue of ‘teaching people to fish’, there are multiple dimensions to this. In reality, there are situations in which help has to be given without ‘teaching’ anything, like in the case of the elderly or terminally ill patients requiring palliative care. There is little use of encouraging them to help themselves. There is a need to ensure that they get support not only at any one time but for as long as they live. On the other hand, there are many people who need to be supported so that they can enhance their capacity to support themselves. Such support may be required to get them out of their current difficult situation so that they can eventually continue with their lives without external support. Creating perennial dependency is not a desirable strategy for development practice. Even if some people show a tendency to continue with such dependency, or resist attempts to move out of their difficult situation, it is important to encourage them to be independent and over time, they may start enjoying it.

A person’s ability to acquire independence in terms of sustenance depends on higher `productivity’. Here, we consider productivity in the broadest possible context. Each person has only a limited amount of time at hand (say 8-10 hours a day). If a person cannot survive on the income that he/she earns, they must earn more by working for the same 8-10 hours. Being forced to work for more hours for subsistence is not a sustainable solution. There is a need for more capital to be infused into his/her work. This could be the case of a carpenter who acquires an electric drilling or cutting machine in place of the manual one. Productivity will also go up if people engage in skilled work rather than unskilled work. Here, skill is the capital which enhances the productivity. People should have the knowledge of how to make the best use of their situation (in selling their skills or products, investing in savings for children or old age, meeting their basic needs by incurring minimum expenditure and so on), and this knowledge – or education in the broadest sense – is also needed for enhancing productivity. People should also know how to achieve happiness from the resources they have (and stay away from undesirable habits like alcoholism to achieve happiness, which only drains away their resources). There is also the need for social and cultural capital to develop meaningful relationships and to find joyful situations. All these are part of enhancing the productivity of life. In many situations, development practice would mean enabling people to attain this higher level of productivity[1].

These require different strategies. An important strategy of development practice is to help people acquire capital, and in the current world, the most important form of capital is education. Hence, anybody who cannot have an education will have a significantly diminished capacity to help himself/herself. All possible help should be given to people to acquire education. Let us consider what constitutes this capital.

3.1 Providing appropriate education

This is so since many parents (and their children) may not use schooling well even if schools are provided in their locality.

There are social, economic and cultural factors that may discourage children from going to school regularly and learning[2]. These constraints need to be understood and addressed in every context if we want to ensure that people get the benefit of education for their long-term welfare.

Most people have wonderful ideas on what the content of education should be. But the preference for the 'type' of education depends on the social, economic and cultural endowment of parents. While lower middle-class parents may want to send their boys for gruelling entrance exam coaching so that they can get admission into engineering or medical colleges, not many among the affluent or the upper-middle class may do so. Hence, depending on where the development actor is in the socio-economic and caste structure of the Indian society, he/she may have ideas on what desirable education is. However, the prime objective while helping somebody to acquire education should be to see how it can make a difference to their life situation. Getting useful skills needed for a job in the formal industrial sector is an important way by which the life of a poor person can improve. On the other hand, such an education may not be attractive to a middle-class (probably, upper-caste) family in India. Hence, the recipients' background should influence the nature of education that will be useful for them and not the lofty ideals of the development practitioner.

There are other situations in which the help provided to poorer people by development practitioners and others may work against their acquiring education. One can think about an employment-generation scheme for poor women supported by a charitable organization where they may be organized to create a micro-enterprise, say, for making pickle or cultivating vegetables. Such an enterprise may give these poor, illiterate women a modestly high income compared to a situation without this intervention. Hence, such interventions are useful. However, what if these women use their daughters to get additional help with their work at the microenterprise or with the housework? This could lead to a decline in the importance of schooling for these girls. This may happen even if they continue to go to school but do not pay attention to studies, reducing their learning achievements. The crucial point is that a strategy to help poor people should not work against the schooling of their younger generation. Additional steps are needed on the part of the development practitioner to avoid such an undesirable outcome.

It is not only the children who need education for enhancing their long-run welfare. Employed adults need it so that they can update their skills and processes in this era marked by technological developments. Many jobs or occupations have become unviable these days. Old-time carpentry is fast disappearing due to the use of pre-fabricated, factory made-furniture. One can see similar changes in the service industry. Many small-scale travel agents and grocery shops are finding it difficult to survive in the age of online shopping and the spread of large retail chains. Hence, switching jobs and reskilling is important for the long-term welfare of people whose livelihoods become unviable or less rewarding over time. Though some of them may be able to do so on their own, many others may need help. This can be an area of intervention for development practitioners.

3.2 Making information available

Information is as important as education. When parents send their child to school, the decision is based on their expected benefits from schooling in comparison with what the family can gain by not sending the child to school but to work. The expected benefits depend on what they (depending on their class, caste, gender, location, etc.) actually gain from it. The fact that some people get well-paying jobs through education need not encourage everybody to acquire education due to the deep fragmentation in the Indian society. Information on many other issues helps human and social development in India. Provision of information on the importance of the reduction of family size, simple practices that improve health care (like the start of breastfeeding soon after birth or oral rehydration therapy for controlling diarrhoea, etc.), use of contraceptive devices, ill-effects of smoking, and so on have improved the living conditions of people. For farmers to learn about newer crops and other viable livelihood practices through the information provided by governmental and non-governmental agencies. Hence, provision of appropriate information could be an important strategy to enhance the long run welfare by development organizations.

3.3 Facilitating networking

The capital required for long-term welfare need not be in the form of education alone. Encouraging people to acquire social capital (and networks) and cultural capital (in the form of desirable norms) also helps them. Even in this era marked by an information explosion, social networks play an important role. For example, these are important for facilitating migration for better employment. In the absence of intervention by external agencies, poorer people depend on community networks and other facilitators available to them. This may have two implications: first, better opportunities would be available only to the few who have close linkages to the privileged networks. Kinship and family connections would matter more then and these may not be available to others even if they are capable and deserving. Secondly, traditional networks need not be enabling or liberating for all sections of the society. The caste and ethnic divisions or the characteristics of strong patriarchy may work against the welfare of some sections of the society. Hence, access to more inclusive and enabling networks are needed for people who need to use newer opportunities like migration (within or outside the country). Networks are important for employment too. Labour markets are imperfect due to the issues of information asymmetry. In facilitating mechanisms that communicate the real capabilities of candidates to a wider set of potential employers to who they do not have direct access or information about, development practitioners can address this issue.

3.4 Changing norms

It may be necessary to change the behaviour and habits of people to make these more in line with the needs of human development. A typical example in India is that of open defecation. It is understood that many people continue with this practice in parts of India not due to the lack of money for constructing and maintaining an inexpensive but hygienic toilet, but due to the perception that open defecation is not a bad practice. The continuation of this practice has serious negative implications like a high incidence of water-borne diseases, and worm infestation, negative impact on nutritional intake, stunting of growth in children leading to cognitive limitations and limited educational achievements. Hence, abandoning such practices requires normative change. Similar changes are needed in India to prevent child marriages; encourage parents to send children, especially girls, to school; and, to ensure that women lead as fulfilling lives as men do.

There could be an opposition or unwillingness to work towards these changes in norms. Some may take a liberal position and think that people should pursue their own `community norms' and outsiders should not impose their values. As long as, outsiders do not cause the annihilation of the people's culture, a completely hands-off approach in an underdeveloped society may not be desirable. Changing norms is necessary for achieving basic human development in line with the universal notion of human rights. There is some virtue in such a notion of human rights informing and influencing the development practice.

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