development dialogue paper
no.9 | may 2014

Post-2015 and the Poison Threads – Shift the Gaze

Amitabh Behar

In this paper Amitabh Behar talks about the 'golden threads' of global development versus the 'poison threads', the latter according to Behar are the real causes of endemic poverty, growing inequality and exclusion.

'The global leadership and the UN face the sizable challenge of making a historic choice between continuing the legacy and hegemony of neoliberalism or of weaving together a "new deal" which is truly transformative and puts the poor and ordinary citizens at the center', says Behar in the paper.

'Tharcherism'

Margaret Thatcher's funeral in 2013 was attended by representatives of more than 170 countries with the particular exception of Iran, North Korea and Argentina. It was a demonstration of the continuing spell of 'Thatcherism' on the global community in-spite of her polarising legacy. The world has changed dramatically since her demitting office in 1990- with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Internet explosion, 9/11 and more recently the rise of BRICS, particularly China. However, amidst all these monumental changes the fundamental frame of local (i.e. national) and global policy and political discourse around the world has largely revolved around the fulcrum of 'Thatcherism' and neoliberalism. Unfortunately, this discourse is hegemonic and reflects the dictum so often used during Margaret Thatcher's time; 'there is no alternative'. This is notwithstanding the very serious challenges and political alternatives from Latin America; continuing fuel, food and financial crisis; questions of environmental sustainability; the iconic 'Occupy Movement' along with peoples' struggles around the world in the Arab Spring or the anti-rape protests in Delhi and though numerically feeble but morally powerful slogan of 'an alternative world is possible' from the World Social Forum.

Amidst this neoliberal fundamentalism, the declaratory activism of the United Nations flourished and gained ground in the nineties in the form of several historic conferences including Cairo, Rio, Beijing, and Copenhagen, on crucial human rights and developmental issues leading to a powerful Millennium Declaration of the United Nations saying 'We have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs'. Most remained skeptical of the UNs ability to deliver substantively on any of the outcomes of these declarations including the Millennium Declaration. The framing of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as the path to achieve the Millennium Declaration soon exposed the reduced ambitions of the UN. The big gains emanating from the hard work of the nineties through the various conferences were diluted by a simple matrix presenting a set of reductive and charitable indicators leading to activist protests calling these 'Minimalist Development Goals'. The idea of politics and rights were consciously and by design taken out of the global development discourse.

MDG's: Unprecedented interest

Despite the weaknesses of the MDGs, the global community recognised the power and influence of a jointly agreed developmental framework. This resulted in an unprecedented interest in the framing of the post-2015 developmental framework amongst development practitioners and civil society actors. Laudably, the UN responded by setting up an ambitious consultative process of reaching out to millions of people and other stakeholders through online platforms, around 100 country consultations (which in turn held consultations with diverse stakeholders like youth, trade unions, civil society etc), thematic global conferences and several other initiatives. On top of this, the UN set up the High Level Panel of eminent persons, co-chaired by the Heads of States of Liberia, Indonesia and the United Kingdom. The HLP in turn had multiple rounds and channels of consulting various stakeholders. This was further followed up by the release of the Secretary General's report on the MDGs and the new development agenda in the UN General Assembly in September 2013. After this, the platform shifted to the Open Working Group (OWG) meetings, but the process of consultations and incorporating inputs from a variety of stakeholders continued. Surely, the UN has been able to set up a fairly broad based consultative (but not fully inclusive) process, though it is not clear how these enormous inputs would systematically feed into the final outcome document. This has raised concerns about the real intent of these consultations, seen primarily by some observers as public posturing while according to many critical voices the defining narrative of the post-2015 is pre-scripted.

The UN system and its machinery along with some member states have galvanised significant online and offline action along with much debates and discussions by think tanks and research institutions for advise and leadership on the post-2015 framework. The global leadership has a historic opportunity of playing a crucial role in developing a global developmental framework which could eradicate extreme poverty and 'uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity, particularly from the perspective of socially excluded and marginalised people and communities' as enshrined in the Millennium Declaration. The world therefore has a serious possibility of presenting an alternative vision which is transformational for people, communities and countries.

A new deal?

The global leadership and the UN- and especially the Secretary General, face the sizable challenge of making a historic choice between continuing the legacy and hegemony of neoliberalism or of weaving together a 'new deal' which is truly transformative and puts the poor and ordinary citizens at the center. A transformative 'new deal' not merely for smoothening the rough edges, which are becoming more and more visible since the financial crisis, but actually making fundamental changes in the organising principles of local (i.e. national) and global economy and governance to address the growing disconnect between common people and the institutions and structures governing them.

Leave no one behind

The two most important UN reports on the process of developing the new framework are aptly titled 'Leave no one behind' and 'A life with dignity for all', reflecting the aspirations from the new post-2015 development goals. To achieve these objectives as the reports note, we need a transformative shift in the way development is visualised, designed and implemented. In addition it needs a shift of gaze and focus. The current focus on eliminating extreme poverty has to be truly transformed into a frame of achieving justice in which extreme poverty is a manifestation of acute injustice and not a problem in itself. To match these expectations the new framework would need to build on seven essential principles, namely, universal and comprehensive human rights; special focus on the structurally (i.e. social, economic and political) excluded communities; gender justice (including private and public spheres); environmental justice (going beyond questions of environmental sustainability while ensuring rights of Mother Earth); accountable and just governance (at national and international level); equal and just global trade and financial architecture; and building abiding peace (moving from absence of conflict to real and lasting peace). Looking at the current discourse of the post-2015 agenda, it is clear that once again the UN would be articulating the post-2015 developmental framework in the language of goals and indicators. While the idea of goals and indicators has some merits, it would be critical to go beyond merely outcome goals and indicators by adding process indicators to monitor the actual realization of the transformative agenda and inclusion indicators to reflect the real success of the new transformative framework reaching the last person.

Anger or aspiration

Globally we are witnessing two strong and parallel narratives, one of anger and the other of aspirations. Institutionalised power denies the existence of the narrative of anger. For instance, the international and multilateral institutions keep presenting Tunisia and Egypt as 'poster boys' of development and governance in the region, until a few weeks before the Arab Spring broke out in 2010-11 , totally missing the peoples' anger in the country. Similarly, peoples' aspiration for life with dignity is completely ignored or at best subsumed within the growth-led model of development. The idea of 'golden threads' so passionately pursued by the UK Prime Minister David Cameron, as one of the co-chairs of the HLP in 2013, has the potential of repeating the same mistake by not connecting with the narrative of people's anger or aspirations of life with dignity. This approach also once again focuses on manifestations of poverty and does not confront the structural causes of poverty.

If the UN is serious about eradicating extreme poverty and inequity it has to address the poison threads of global political-economy, which perpetuate and accentuate poverty by creating conditions of inequity and by alienating the rights of poor and ordinary citizens. The double speak of talking of 'golden threads' on the one hand and the continuing with the poison threads on the other hand needs to stop in the post-2015 discourse. These poison threads include privatisation of natural resources – land, water and forests - on which most excluded and poor communities survive for their livelihood; corporate land grabs and mega-mines; unjust global trade rules and unequal financial architecture; corruption and brazen impunity; and the privatisation of essential social services like health and education. All these result in furthering inequalities, ruining the environment and impoverishing communities across the globe.

Golden or poison threads

We need to juxtapose Prime Minister Cameron's idea of 'golden threads' with the realities and life experiences of the majority of the global people for understanding the 'poison threads' of local and global development which are the real causes of endemic poverty, growing inequality and exclusion. For instance, the idea of building a global partnership amongst donor countries, multilaterals and private wealth is viewed as an important 'golden thread' for raising financial resources to achieve the MDGs and its successor. Unfortunately this approach is

embedded in a charity and aid framework ignoring the more fundamental questions about reasons for paucity of financial resources and does not attempt to find sustainable and structural solutions. There are enough studies which show that adequate financing for development can be achieved domestically if we focus on the 'poison threads' of illicit financial flows and unfair tax exemptions and incentives. According to the Global Financial Integrity report 'Illegal financial flows from developing countries over the decade ending 2009', developing countries are estimated to have lost US$ 8.44 trillion to illicit flows in a decade. On the other hand, we have developed taxation systems across countries which in the name of encouraging economic activities give large tax breaks and exemptions to private corporations, often at the cost of domestic resource mobilisation. To take an example, a study by the Center for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) suggests that if half of the tax revenues presently foregone in India due to the plethora of exemptions in the central government tax system would instead get collected, this would generate additional tax revenues worth 3% of the GDP. To get a sense of proportion it is useful to note that the current expenditure on public health in India hovers around 1.2% of GDP. The other critical 'poison threads' in this domain would include the

continuation of tax havens, corruption and unfair trade systems. This is an illustration of the 'poison threads' or the structural causes from one critical sphere of development. In every dimension of development we have structures, processes and systems which lead to creation of poverty and marginalisation.

The global leadership and the UN need to shift their gaze away from addressing the manifestations of poverty towards addressing the structural causes of poverty and social exclusion. Several civil society actors came together in March 2013 in Bonn to discuss the post-2015 agenda and announced the end of their honeymoon with the UN-led post-2015 process by issuing an eight point 'red flag' statement, which include land and water grab; extractive development model; planetary boundaries; gender justice, economic and financial architecture; human rights; peace and conflict; and corruption and accountability.

The post-2015 development agenda is a historic opportunity for a generation of leaders. They have a chance of altering the course of history. However, if they do not seize this opportunity, we would witness a growing sense of disillusionment and deepening of the global narrative of anger, which might erupt at any time.

Amitabh Behar (amitabh.behar@gmail.com) Executive Director, National Foundation for India (NFI, www.nfi.org.in) and Co-chair of Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP, www.whiteband.org, is one of the largest anti poverty alliance proactively engaging with the post-2015 agenda)