



Three Levels of Need in Development Assistance¹

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The concept of “need” appears often in the literature on development. This recurrence is understandable since what we are doing in development is helping people to meet their needs; or in relief, to resolve immediate and practical needs; or in rehabilitation, to re-stabilize a situation so that people can once again meet certain rudimentary needs for themselves. Need is such an important concept that the literature has focused on it extensively and much of the technology of development is based on the notion of need. Therefore, we often begin at the point of need without adequately examining the notion of needs itself. Needs are not that easy to define or identify, and needs are not a satisfactory way to look at people. No matter how you translate the words “need” and “needs” in various languages, it carries with it a certain view of deficit.

If I were to hold up my hand in front of you and ask, “What does that hand need in order to make it full or complete?” You would say, “Well, apparently you have only three fingers and a thumb. You need another finger.” Your view of my hand is taken from a model of completeness that you have in your mind. That is a hand. That is a hand with a need. A hand with five fingers is a hand. This one is not really a hand; it’s a hand with need. That is a deficit view.

The notion of needs becomes problematic when one assumes that everyone has needs (a fair assumption); but the assumption that everyone has needs does not mean that everyone is self-aware of needs—or that something *you* see as a need is perceived by the other as a need.

Humanity in general has a relatively common need structure. There are certain things that differ among people and cultures; but underneath it all, that which makes us most easily recognizable as a species, is a set of needs. Those needs are met in different ways. Humans, for example, need to regulate external temperature in order to accommodate body temperature. That accommodation will differ from country to country, but the basic need is the same. Similarly, the need for shelter is a common human need, expressed differently from culture to culture.

To presume that because these people live in tents they need brick buildings with elevators is of course where we make our key mistake—to interpret the needs of others in terms of our view of needs. You say, “Well, we wouldn’t do anything as absurd as that.” Granted, but we do things that are almost as absurd as that, and often without recognizing it because of the second assumption we make about needs: needs always look different to those directly affected.

One of the biggest problems in a “needs approach” then, is the temptation to presume that one’s view of another’s needs is reliable. I submit that if you cannot also feel needs, you are better not to act; wait until your seeing, your vision of needs, can be checked against what those who are directly affected by the presumed need are feeling. The less mature way of dealing with the needs of others is to try to convince them that what we see as needs they also should see as needs.

There are two viewpoints on needs: the basic viewpoint of one who looks and the viewpoint of one who feels. The one who looks and the one who feels, are both empirically oriented; but one is inside while the other is outside the problem.

¹ Ted Ward. Three Levels of Need in Development Assistance. Church and Development Seminar. Wheaton College, July 1981

Generally, needs assessment is weakest at the point of defining questions. In other words, needs assessment generally asks about something, but the questions are often designed by outside observers. If we design a needs assessment in terms of the outside viewpoint, we will miss things that really are important. Of course, it's not a good procedure to simply use an open-ended approach: "Tell us what your needs are." Needs assessment has to be precise; but needs assessments rarely see the right specifics if done by those who only look rather than by those who also feel.

Onlookers of wide experience and great empathy are apt to see more and to see more accurately than those who have narrow, or limited experience, and who are ethnocentric—the frame of mind that views one's own culture, and one's own experiences as the norm; and the experiences of others as somehow off that norm. Less experienced people tend to be more ethnocentric and consequently make poor judgments in a situation.

Development workers will also encounter people; people who have been stepped upon—politically, economically, and socially. They are apt to have a limited capability to even feel their problem. Oppressed people develop a kind of numbness in order to cope. People who are better able to express their needs are people who are liberated. And because you also live in relative liberty, you can make reasonably perceptive judgments about their situation.

The issue with the oppressed is their lack of consciousness about their needs, and their lack of conscience to do anything about them. Paulo Freire saw these as interrelated problems—conscientization: a concept that comes from blending two rudimentary thoughts. He believes it is conscientization that drives people to action. But if they are not conscious of their situation, they have no ground for conscience.

To summarize: Needs is a dangerous concept. Although we can assume that all people have needs, we must remember that the problem is not in having needs, but in the viewpoint about needs. A viewpoint on need is inherently different for a person who is looking in from the outside that for a person who is feeling or experiencing "need". When we work among the oppressed, quite often we are dealing with people who are not able to feel with any degree of activation. They are numbly conscious that life is hard but that is the beginning and end of their ability to express their problems. And if people cannot talk about their problems, it does no good for outsiders to define their needs.

Three Levels of Need

I've identified at least three levels of understanding about needs. The first of these we will classify as *things to be acquired*. When the view of need is in terms of things to be acquired, or we might say a "gap to be filled," we have what is sometimes called a deficit view of needs. The fixation or emphasis in such a view of needs is on those things or interventions that will meet the needs. If I have that view of needs, it follows that my focus is going to be on what could be brought into that situation to make it different or better. I see people as *those who lack*. My valuing of the people and the situation relates to my awareness that they are people who lack.

The task of the developer (or "agent" or "facilitator") is to apply such adequate resources that the need no longer exists. The self-perception of the developer is that of a change agent—one who is a bringer of the new. Much of the language of the change agent comes out of this image of need. It is not an altogether ludicrous view of need, and I admit that I tend to operate this way in a lot of situations. But there are many, many times when I admit that I know better, because there are more elegant and adequate ways to conceive the situation and understand needs. Needs are what life is all about and life is full of the processes of coping with needs. You cope with needs in the sense of arm wrestling, not in the sense of obliterating. You don't meet needs; you cope with needs.

The second level of needs is as *things to be resolved, or conditions to be set right*. "Things to be acquired" is quite different from conditions or circumstances to be dealt with or resolved. Generally, the great contrast between the first and second level of needs is the distinction between

applying resources and facilitating a process. At the second level the development worker states that “I want to be involved in your need.” That’s very different from saying, “I have the solution.”

At this level, people are seen as *those who can be different*. In level one, the development specialist is preoccupied with the resource that will fix the need. At the second level, he or she sees people as having worth. They can be different. The limitation, of course, is the lingering semi-judgmental quality that says in effect, “These people aren’t yet what they could be.” It is still a view from above.

The intent, at the second level, is to make people more able. The self-perception at this level of understanding is that of a facilitator or catalyst. “Because I am there as a development worker, things will happen that will make people more able—because they are people who can be different.” A facilitator makes people more able to cope because he or she sees them as people with the potential to engage tasks concerning their needs.

The second level seems more sophisticated than the first, but it is not the end of the road. I can define a third level in terms of my life process. The definition of needs at this third level is the definition of life itself. “Needs?! That’s what life is!” Needs are human process. You live with them. It’s part of being human.

The third level of need is *dynamic life processes*. We have the influence of sin, and we have the influence of God’s intervention and redemption. At this third level, the development worker focuses on the dynamics of the situation. “What’s going on in that situation?” People are seen as those who are engaged in life processes—or stalemated. In other words, it’s possible that the processes they’re engaged in are flawed, or not working. So we see things not just as people who lack something, or as people who can be different, but as people who are victimized by broken processes. We look less at people who are somehow deficient and instead see situations that are deficient. It isn’t that people are trapped because of what they’ve done necessarily, but because of what’s happened to them. I’m not for a moment suggesting that people aren’t responsible. People are responsible, but people are responsible within the frame of reference of the processes that impinge upon them. For example, some people are trapped in poverty. The great mass of the world’s poor are poor because of conditions that are absolutely out of their control. So we look at them not as people who lack, not as people who can be different—in fact, they can’t be different. They are in processes that are no longer working.

I have argued that development is a natural process. For example, no parent has to say to the child, “Now I want you to get taller. I want you to grow up.” We don’t have to encourage those processes. Those processes of development are part of the created nature of humankind, and the nature of human society. The processes are there, but the processes may be stalemated. When we look at needs in terms of this dynamic life view, we look at the nature of society and social processes and say, “That’s the way to understand what’s going on.”

The development worker’s task, in this view, is to reestablish and/or reopen life processes. To promote justice. Simply giving to meet needs solves things temporarily, but it does not solve things in the long run. People don’t become more able if they’re trapped in processes that have stalemated. The development worker works alongside those people to reopen life processes. Development of people is not bringing them technology. Development of people is helping those engines of development *in societies* to begin to move again.

The effective facilitator of development in the third image, in the third model of development, is a person who has committed herself/himself to “walking with people,” to sharing their condition, including their sharing their need. That process suggests movement and change; but not the kind of change that occurs by “take my arm and follow me” so much as “we walk together in this.”