

# **SOME PRINCIPLES FOR AN ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE AND DEVELOPMENT**

by

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## **PRESENT PROBLEMS**

Now, before we can speak of alternative social lifestyles or alternative development, we should of course find out what is wrong with existing lifestyles or practices.

The major problem which I think we face is that we have got our concept of development mixed up, not only in Malaysia but in developing countries as a whole also.

The theory of development which we have adopted arose from the West. Very briefly, it states that Third World countries are poor because they lack modern technology. If they invest enough money on technological growth, the economy will grow fast. The faster the growth of the economy, the greater will be our development, and people will stop being poor.

Due to the acceptance of this theory, developing countries including Malaysia have measured the progress of their nation according to how high is the rate of growth. However, although several developing countries managed to achieve good rates of economic growth, they were unable to solve their problems of poverty, unemployment and inequalities. There are more starving, homeless and sick people in the world today than five or ten or even a hundred years ago.

Contrary to the orthodox development theory, the benefits of economic growth did not always “trickle down” to the vast majority of people. This led to a new questioning of the meaning of development, and the asking of the following questions: Development of what? Development for who? Development by who?

In other words, what is it that we are developing? Are we producing useful goods and services required by the ordinary person, or are we producing things such as armaments or relatively unnecessary products such as electric toothbrushes enjoyed by a few? Who is it that benefits from development? Is it the majority of poor people or only the elites? Who makes the decisions in development? Are they only the planners or are the people themselves consulted and do they themselves participate in development?

This type of questioning has led to a new framework for looking at development, called the ‘Basic Needs Approach.’ Stated briefly, this approach focuses attention not so much on economic growth but on the development of people, especially the poor. According to this approach, genuine development means the increasing satisfaction or fulfilment of the

basic material needs of the majority of people. Such needs include food and nutrition, safety and health, housing, a clean environment and access to a secure livelihood.

This new Basic Needs Approach is a good first step away from the concept that growth plus modern technology is the solution to development. But the Basic Needs Theory is by itself also not a satisfying or comprehensive approach to development. It is true that before we can achieve any higher form of development, human beings must have enough food, housing and good health. To this extent, material needs are very crucial and any development worthy of the name must satisfy these material needs.

However, what happens after our basic needs are satisfied? We must then examine whether our human and spiritual needs are being met. We must look at man's relations with his fellow human beings. We must make sure that development is harmonious with nature, rather than destroying nature or the environment in the process. We should, in other words, strive for a type of development which enhances the Quality of Life, taking into account the satisfaction of basic material needs plus man's relations with fellow men, with nature and with himself. Development should result in greater happiness, the satisfaction of material, human and spiritual needs.

Unfortunately, these important aspects of development have seldom been taken into account by planners, theoreticians and academics.

And as a result, the world today faces a whole range of very serious problems. If we don't solve these problems quickly, they may threaten the future of civilisation or even the survival of man.

The first problem is the unequal distribution and the irrational use of the earth's precious resources. The developed countries with 20 per cent of the world's population use up 80 per cent of the world's resources and the gap between rich and poor countries is widening year by year. The disparity and the irrational use of resources can be seen in the fact that American women spend more on cosmetics each year than the budgets of all resources, which could have gone into feeding hungry millions in the poor part of the world went instead to the artificial beautification of a minority in the rich world.

Within developing countries themselves there are also serious inequalities in income. In 1970, the top 5 per cent of households in Malaysia (obtaining 28 per cent of the total income) earned more than the income of the bottom 60 per cent of households (whose combined share was only 24 per cent ).

Because of unequal sharing of resources, we have people spending \$20,000 for a wedding dinner, while 30 per cent of the population are suffering from malnutrition. Some people own several houses, while thousands queue for a housing form. Because resources are limited, it is obvious that one priority in development should be narrowing the inequalities of wealth and income in society.

The problem is made worse by the fact that the world is running out of resources. There may be no more oil in 50 years, and the world's reserves of metals such as lead, zinc and tin will be used up in 50 to 100 years. By the year 2000 most of the world's tropical forests would have been chopped down. We are also running out of croplands, clean water and other resources.

The world's resources are now so depleted that many scientists doubt whether the earth and humanity can continue to survive for another 20 years at the current levels of production and with the present types of lifestyle.

The resource and environmental issue is thus perhaps the most fundamental problem which we face in the world, and it is very urgent for us to think of other alternative social structures and lifestyles if our societies are to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What are the causes of this suicidal depletion of resources? The main reason is the obsession with economic growth in almost every country in the world, and together with this the production of luxury goods which are really not necessary. Because of the unequal distribution of income, a small minority of people control a large share of society's wealth. Their basic needs have already been met, but since they are the ones with the power to buy things, the companies which want to make profits aim their marketing strategy at this small group of people.

And so the advertising men do everything they can to make the people buy their products, whether or not these products are actually useful or necessary. The mass media is used to project clothes, motorcars, cosmetics and other fashionable objects as symbols of success. The possession of such products has become the measure of a person's worth.

And so we have the 'Consumer Culture', a way of life and thinking geared towards buying more and more products, new products, fashionable products. The ordinary person is made to feel inferior and insecure unless he or she can measure up to the latest fashion. Young people are taught to think that the meaning of life is to be fashionable. To be an attractive man, you must smoke a cigarette, wear expensive jeans, own a powerful motorbike. To be an attractive girl, you must use make-up, wear trendy clothes and appear sweet and helpless in the company of men. And adults measure one another's success according to how big their house is, how new their car is, how beautiful their wife is, how clever the children are, and how much money they have in the bank.

We have become a society where people are mad about money and consumer goods. Just stop to observe what are the main interests in life for most people. They are talking all the time about the stock market, which shares are going up or down. They are preoccupied with horse-racing, Toto, four-digit lotteries, mahjong, poker, and all types of betting. They are talking about colour television, video-cassettes, the newest restaurant, the latest car, and what is the latest happening in the 'Dallas' television programme.

The money-centred values in society also lead to a deterioration in human relations and the individual's increasing alienation. Every other person becomes a competitor or a

rival. You may have to stab your friend, relative or colleague in the back to climb up the by ladder. A person is judged not by his personality, kindness or feelings but by his appearance, his clothes, his accent, his money. Instead of having satisfying conversations with friends, people prefer to watch TV or films. Instead of taking walks in the countryside, young people go to the discos. Instead of placing first priority on deep friendships, people tend to value their possessions much more. As you all know, some men treat their cars much more lovingly than their wife and some women love their jewels more than their husband or their friends.

These preoccupations, motivations and values in our society are very wasteful in using up precious resources. To maintain this lifestyle, a lot of physical and financial resources are being used at a time when the majority of the population are still deprived of food, shelter, health and sanitation facilities. We should ask whether this is a rational use of resources, whether this is a genuine form of development, whether people are actually happier, and whether the quality of life can be said to have improved.

## **ELEMENTS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

Given the number of serious problems arising from present development trends, we should think seriously about alternative ways of development which make more rational use of resources and which are more in harmony with human values.

## **REDISTRIBUTION AND RATIONAL USE OF RESOURCES**

The crisis of depleting resources is largely caused by the unequal distribution of resources and the use of much of these resources in producing luxurious products while basic needs of many people are not yet satisfied. In order to improve this situation, the developed countries must first cut down drastically on their consumption levels, revert to a simpler lifestyle and thus reduce their present wastage of the world's resources.

Our developing countries, on the other hand, should not think of taking the same development path of the industrial countries. Instead, we should adopt a type of development which is ecologically sound, and stresses first on providing enough basic goods for the common man.

This implies that we should not emphasise the setting up of expensive industries which manufacture luxury products. Instead, we should encourage the production of food, cheap clothing, low-cost housing and the provision of health, sanitation and education facilities which will directly improve the living standards of the lower-income groups.

But producing goods for the people is insufficient unless the people have the means to buy the goods. Therefore, we should ensure that the people have a secure livelihood, that they have land to plant on, that development projects do not displace them from their

homes or fields or that suitable alternatives are found for them. We should ensure that their jobs can earn them a sufficiently high income.

At the same time, we should discourage the consumption of luxury products or the provision of luxury entertainment services. The imports of luxury items should be heavily taxed. In our development plans, very low priority should be given to industries producing luxury products.

## **THE PROVISION OF BASIC NEEDS**

In order to provide for the basic needs of people, programmes need to be introduced to directly tackle the problems of nutrition, health, housing, transport and so on.

Where *food and nutrition* are concerned, medical studies have shown that up to one-third of the children in the country suffer from malnutrition. Due to the decline in fish catch and the production of vegetables and fruits, the intake of important food items may have dropped in recent years. Our best lands are still being devoted to export crops, while food crops take second place. Many foods sold on the market are unsafe to consume, containing bacteria or chemicals which are dangerous to health.

Since food is the first basic need of man, an alternative development strategy should stress on food production. More land should be given to small farmers to cultivate food crops. There should be a vast expansion of fruit and vegetable cultivation and proper management of livestock production. Steps should be taken to ensure that food manufacturers and retailers provide safe and nutritious food to the public, instead of contaminated or junk food with no nutritious value.

In the area of *health*, many changes and improvements should be made. In the completed Third Malaysia Plan, only 1.6 per cent of total public expenditure was spent on health. The \$800 million spent on cigarettes per year in Malaysia is greater than the Malaysian health programme of \$530 million for the entire five years of the Third Malaysia Plan. The health system here is also based mainly on curative medical services rather than preventive health care. This has led to the emphasis on hospitals, specialised medicine and higher technology, while what is required even more are rural health facilities, the provision of clean water and proper sewage facilities. We constantly read of rivers polluted with cholera germs, bacteria and industrial waste which threaten the health of thousands of rural people. An alternative health structure would stress on eradicating such causes of health problems and on providing simple basic health care facilities among the poor, rather than the urban-based health system where the best medical talents are in private practice or in expensive private hospitals.

*Housing* is another basic need which is far from satisfied in our society. There are hundreds of thousands of squatters without land or houses, and thousands more families who are looking for cheap houses. This is evident from the mad rush for low-cost housing application forms. An alternative housing policy could limit the number of houses a

family can own, while directing developers to build more low-cost houses rather than expensive houses. One of the only viable solutions to the housing problem is for the government to provide land free or very cheaply for the homeless people, for it is land that is really expensive. The people can build their own houses through self-help housing projects, which have been tried successfully in other countries.

The many basic needs problems in our society today may seem very big, but if proper planning is applied and if there is a strong will to solve them, they can be solved. The billions of dollars now earmarked for super-highways, supermarkets, and prestige office buildings could instead be channelled for the development of basic needs industries and facilities. The money is there, the concepts and the will are lacking.

## **NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Nature and the Environment are very precious things. Man requires air and water to live. The forests, lands, oceans, minerals are required to produce food, energy, houses, etc. Today, in pursuit of economic growth, we are destroying nature and the environment. In ten years, there will be no timber left in Malaysia, in fifteen years no more petroleum. Our soil is being washed away by deforestation. The rivers, seas, land and air are being polluted by industries. Many rural communities have seen their crops and fishing grounds destroyed by factory pollution, and by housing development or careless road contractors. Farms are making way for the construction of roads, housing estates and airports. The safety and health of workers in mines and factories are threatened by occupational hazards and inadequate safety measures.

An alternative development strategy would make sure that in producing things, man acts in harmony with ecology and nature. We cannot accept the old thinking that economic growth comes first, and too bad if the environment has to suffer. If the ecology is disturbed, eventually no economic growth is possible at all. Industries must be required to have effective anti-pollution devices. No factory should be allowed to pollute rivers, land or the air. We should conserve our forests and other resources, rather than exploiting and exporting them at such a very rapid rate as at present. In other words, we should not be so greedy as to want a lot of money quickly through exploiting and destroying nature. We should treat nature with loving care, making sure we replace whatever we take from it, planting a new tree if we should chop down one tree. If we drastically curtail the production of luxury goods or fashionable goods, and maintain production to what is necessary for a decent standard of living and no more, then it is possible for us to develop according to ecological principles. Nature will remain our friend, and we will replace Greed with only what we Need. This is a very crucial principle which must be followed in any genuine form of development.

## **APPROPRIATE PRODUCTS**

Following the principle of conserving resources and eliminating wastage, we should be producing goods and services according to certain criteria. We should, in other words, produce only ‘appropriate products’ or things which are really useful, needed and of a good quality. Such products should meet basic needs, should be durable and safe to use instead of the present practice by big industries to produce things which are attractively packaged but are made to malfunction or get spoilt after a certain period, so that people are forced to buy new products and give the company more profits.

If we accept the principle that only appropriate products should be developed, then it follows that products which are inappropriate should be phased out, discouraged and eventually stopped. Tobacco is a very dangerous substance, yet Malaysians smoke \$800 million of cigarettes a year. Alcohol is bad for health and gives an artificial ‘kick’ which makes us lose our senses. Infant formula milk is a poor and inferior substitute for breast milk, yet many mothers now use it to feed their babies because of a mistaken belief that it is good. Lipstick, perfume, trendy clothes do not make a person a better human being, they just ‘package’ a person to give a certain appearance. Sex and violence films and TV programmes, various forms of gambling, and prostitution are facilities and services which can hardly be said to enhance human existence. All such inappropriate products and services should be phased out and replaced with appropriate things in an alternative development strategy. Some people may argue that it’s a matter of taste and values whether a product is bad. Well, the same can be said for heroin. Yet, using certain criteria, we have banned the sale and use of heroin. Using the criterion of appropriateness of products, we can also make a list of appropriate and inappropriate products, although of course this is not an automatically easy thing to do. It is easier to close an eye and let things carry on as they are, but it is also suicidal to do so.

## **APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF WORK**

Many of us in developing countries are blinded by the glamour of modern, sophisticated technologies. Whether in the free-market or the centrally planned countries, there is a belief that “modernisation” in the western technological sense is the essence of development. This cult of modernisation and modern technology blinds us away from considering other modes of development which use less resources and which are more in harmony with good human relations, and with community development.

Many development thinkers and philosophers are now denouncing modern technology as being unsuitable for Third World conditions. They are expensive, can be bought only by the rich minority, use up a lot of energy and do not employ many people. Thus, developing countries should evolve their own “appropriate technologies” and their own techniques in various areas - agriculture, industry, health care, housing, water management, transport, energy and so on. Such technologies should as far as possible make use of local resources available to communities, they should be labour-intensive (employ many people), relatively simple to operate with skills which can be passed on,

they should be based on sound ecological principles and be of a small scale suitable for family or community use.

The term “appropriate technology” may be new but the existence of such technologies is not. There is no better place to start looking for this than in our own traditional technologies which have developed through many generations and adapted to local conditions. For instance, local traditional fishing methods rely very much on the skills and labour of small-scale fishermen. They are ecologically sound, do not result in the gross overfishing of which the big trawler boats are guilty, and they involve the participation of the community. Thus, traditional fishing technology is consistent with our principles of harmony with nature, good human relations and the fulfilment of the individual through the pride in using his own skills and controlling his own trade.

In the area of housing, a study by Lim Jee Yuan has shown that the traditional Malay house is superior to the modern brick houses in the housing estate. The Malay house has been constructed through the generations in a very skilful way to provide proper ventilation and flow of air, protection from the heat of the Malaysian sun, to give proper lighting, to make maximum use of space. The Malay house is also cheap, can be constructed by family labour with the help of the community, and blends in very harmoniously with the natural surroundings. In contrast, the much glamourised modern housing-estate units are very hot, have poor ventilation, are very expensive and do not blend with nature in any way. The brick house was built for English climatic conditions. Yet because of the invasion of western values, people think highly of the brick house and look down with contempt on the beautiful Malay house. In the architecture courses in our universities, our students are never taught about the Malay house. In our Housing Ministry, which plans the construction of all the thousands of new houses, it is doubtful whether any planner or official has ever thought of the Malay house as a worthwhile model to study.

Serious studies are also now being made into the various systems of traditional medicine and health care in Malaysia. No less an authority than the World Health Organisation has recommended that traditional health systems be integrated with modern medicine to form an appropriate health strategy in developing countries. In Malaysia, where we have traditional Malay, Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli medicines and health practices, there is an extremely rich source to tap in formulating the right mix in an appropriate health system. For instance, the pre-natal and post-natal care for mother and baby provided by the *bidan* or Malay traditional midwife is a valuable skill not available in modern medicine. Similarly we have acupuncture, ayurvedic medicine, bone-setting and massage practices in Chinese and Indian traditional medicine. Of course, not all traditional medicine practices are necessarily good, but the valuable aspects should be identified and promoted to complement the positive aspects of modern medicine. (It should be recognised that modern medicine also has its negative aspects).

There are many other traditional industries and practices which can be promoted, improved on and form the basis on which development is built. These technologies are also dependent on the individual skills and craftsmanship of the villager or worker, whose

pride and fulfilment in work is far higher than the worker in a factory who is controlled by the machine. Modern technology and factory work often reduces man to a mere servant of the machine. The machine controls man rather than man taking charge of the production process, and this leads to the dehumanisation of the worker. On the other hand, traditional technology is smaller in scale and allows the worker to develop his craft and to take pride in his work. This creative aspect of work can be seen in the traditional fisherman, boat-builder, house carpenter and furniture maker. To enjoy work, to develop one's creative powers in making and shaping things, to control the work process – this is another important aspect of a genuine development strategy.

## **APPROPRIATE HABITAT**

In a world with scarce energy and other resources the present trend of living in cities may have to be reversed as transportation becomes more and more expensive. It is also getting impossible for the city authorities to provide the housing, water, electricity and other facilities for the exploding population in towns.

The highly centralised big factories may also have to break down into smaller units, while the distance travelling between home and the workplace should be reduced. The trend may therefore revert to living and working in small communities.

This pattern of habitat and settlement fits in with the principles of harmony with nature, community involvement and resource conservation. Living and working in small communities will also reduce the sense of alienation, loneliness and individualism which are ever present in the big city which sometimes leads to mental problems and great stress. The small community and small economy way of life is more appropriate to man's harmonious relations with nature and with his fellow men.

## **VALUES AND APPROPRIATE LIFESTYLES**

What we have suggested in terms of appropriate products, basic needs, rational use of resources and habitat cannot work unless we change our values, our motivations in life and our lifestyles. Obviously the simple type of development painted above can come about only if we give up the high-level way of life and the type of values which focus on possessing more and more things.

Instead, we have to adopt a simple way of life, in which we have the basic necessities to enable a reasonable standard of living but not the desire to chase after more and more luxury products for the sake of status. Indeed, if we do away with all the unnecessary gadgets of urban living, we will have more time and inclination to concentrate on human relationships and on meaningful leisure activities that bring us closer to human and spiritual fulfilment. Free from the pressures of competition and the dictates of fashion, people will have the freedom to develop the things which really matter in life - friendship, human relations, religion, reading books, the enjoyment of nature, music, the

arts. When we decide to cut down on buying more products, we are not so tied down to taking care of our new gadgets. There will be less pressure to work more or earn more. Human values based on the simple lifestyle can take priority.

This simple way of life is by no means unrealistic or over-idealistic, but can be achieved if we change our perceptions and our values. It is also a lifestyle which we must adopt if we are to conserve resources and avoid the catastrophe of the world running out of resources. The simple lifestyle, in my opinion, will bring us more happiness and more fulfilment than the high-pressure world of the rat race. It is an essential component of an alternative development strategy.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, I have tried to present what I feel are the main problems which arise from our present development. At the moment, our society does not give sufficient attention to the issues of basic needs, the use of resources, the environmental problem.

I have tried to offer an outline of the changes which are required if we are to achieve a type of development which satisfies people's basic material needs but which is also in harmony with nature and where good human relations and spiritual development can exist and prosper.

Today, almost every country in the world, under all shades of political organisation, are sharing a false belief that achieving high economic growth and modern technology will bring about genuine development. Because resources are running out, the high style of living is no longer possible. Building skyscrapers, big buildings and modern gadgets cannot by themselves bring about development of people and fulfilment of the individual. For a genuine type of development, we need to put the stress on people, not products. We need to develop the human being and to promote good human relations, not the consumer culture based on fashion and competition.

Many people may think that the views and suggestions presented here are unrealistic and cannot work because they are too idealistic or romantic. Other people may think we are advocating a return to primitive times. But I believe that we are really facing a very serious world-wide crisis in the depletion of resources and that our development and way of life must change if man is to survive. Already we are facing a serious world economic recession, which is partly due to this resource crisis. It is therefore up to everyone here to do their part in making others aware of the problems which lie ahead. There are alternatives to the present problems faced by society, but these alternatives can come about only if we ourselves are willing and ready to change our thinking and our way of life, and to persuade others to do so.

(Undated)