

Navigate Together: Against the Current, Towards New Horizons

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ABSTRACT. This article critiques the dominant "development" paradigm, which perpetuates colonial structures, ecological degradation, and socio-economic inequalities. The essay introduces an alternative vision called "levelment," rooted in biblical principles of justice, sufficiency, and interdependence. Four critical movements for achieving levelment are outlined: transitioning from growth to rest and care for creation, embracing downward self-giving to redistribute privilege, practicing debt forgiveness to challenge predatory systems, and fostering polyvision to counter monocultural perspectives. Drawing on scriptural themes, we envision a collective effort by diverse communities to restore balance and pursue shalom. This paradigm challenges the current development narrative, offering a pathway toward sustainability, equity, and reconciliation in a world gripped by poly-crisis. This framework provides a foundation for reimagining global justice, calling for shared responsibility and collective transformation grounded in theological and ethical principles.

KEYWORDS: development, justice, shalom, sustainability, downward mobility, debt forgiveness, biblical ethics, economic discipleship

Outline and Introduction

As many scholars have noted, the current development paradigm is broken and cannot be fixed. At the same time, on a planet in poly-crisis and due to the urgent need for international and supra-national justice work, a process of equilibration is essential at many levels: intra-societal, trans-societal, sub-societal, and ecosystemic. Counter proposals, preposterous provocation, re-imaginaries, constitutive visions and, most importantly, networked grounded communities that evoke and embody practice are urgently called for. This paper proposes levelment as both a vision and a course of action. Readers are challenged to peer out toward their own horizons, but especially to get into a boat and venture away from familiar shores to then navigate their own new courses. To that end, they are first invited to join on a sail with the author and his crew and to learn some of the ropes they might need on their journey.

Development is broken

Progress, dreams of well-being, and the aspirational horizons of humanity have been subsumed by a single word: development, international development. The myth goes like this: some countries and some people groups somehow innocently got ahead on their own. Now, through the development industry, these same peoples are going to help the rest of the world catch up. They will help the others overcome their past—their naturally underdeveloped condition.

In this mythological world, “development” has become more than a word. It is a verb, an industry, an academic discipline, an imaginary, a discourse, a map of power, genealogy, and destiny. Development marks out the borders of possibility and defines orthodoxy. There are attempts to improve the myth of development, to wrestle it under control, to open it up to new possibilities and other dreams. For example, valiant efforts are made at sustainable development, ecological development, alternative development, Christian development, even feminist, anticapitalist post-development. But development itself is broken. We cannot fix it by adding adjectives. Another development is impossible because development is colonial by

nature. It is unidirectional. It runs from North to South and never in reverse. It is authoritarian but without the authority to resolve today's challenges (Padilla DeBorst 2018, 65-76).

Poli-Crisis

An honest look at the current world scenario, below the illusions of growth and the global market, unavoidably reveals a series of intersecting crises marked by disarray and unbalance (Măcelaru 2023, 649-662; Măcelaru 2018, 65-76; Măcelaru 2014a, 67-78).

- An ecological crisis, in which climates and ecosystems have been thrown out of equilibrium by human energy consumption and the consequent loss of species and warming of the climate.
- An economic crisis, in which human greed has bred growing inequality and thrown societies out of balance (Măcelaru 2022, 621-629; Măcelaru 2014b, 75-82).
- A political crisis, in which democratic institutions are thrown into doubt by unprincipled populisms that are seeking unbridled power.
- An ecclesial crisis, in which an increasing number of young people are turning their backs on current forms of church.

Against the current

In the face of these compounded imbalances, I here propose instead of development the alternative imaginary of 'Levelment'. This, I suggest, is a mode of reflection and practice that would ensue if all people, rich and poor, embodied diverse expressions of *shalom*. For this, as I will elaborate further, the rich and powerful must descend and empty themselves. Within this paradigm, the impoverished are liberated and redeemed, but not by the altruistic rich. Instead, together, privileged and underprivileged, are all overwhelmed by the task ahead of them and struggle toward interdependence on each other and dependence on God. This is performed by all the children of the Servant Saviour, in communal collaboration, in fear, trembling and solidarity. This is done by new assemblies, out of new wineskins, exercising ancient practices, breaking across and eroding borders in an effort towards mutual equality, in diversity, restoring and depending on the rest of the created world, God's creation. So, while development tells a set of national stories, it also often hides history, homogenizes the future, and justifies the present. It not only misses the forest for the trees, but it misses the clear-cut rainforest that fills Northern libraries with tropical lumber. In Levelment, in contrast, the wealthy and the poor come into conversation and reconciliation in such a way that it is not a matter of the poor catching up with the wealthy but of all, together, seeking a more just equilibrium, a balanced, levelled condition (This is the theme of the author forthcoming doctoral dissertation, Padilla DeBorst, 2024).

Levelment

Biblical themes, which are strung through the entire biblical story from creation to the days of the early church, provide the grounding for this balanced, just way of being and relating (Măcelaru 2017, 49-56). In order for levelment to be embodied, four central movements are necessary. Both in concept and in practice, communities need to move beyond growth to rest, sufficiency and care of creation. Second, they need to move beyond privilege to downward self-giving. Third, they need to move beyond predatoriness to debt forgiveness. And finally, they need to move beyond singularity to polyvision. We now explore these movements.

Beyond growth to rest, sufficiency and care of creation

In almost every version of development policy over the years, growth is the unquestionable goal. Usually, a series of qualifying adjectives are added to growth to make it more palatable or fashionable. But growth remains the central line of the plot. Christian international and community

developers also tend to assume this central premise as a guidepost in their efforts. The consistent assumption is that accumulation, surplus, more and bigger, are always better.

In contrast, when we turn to Scripture, we rarely find images of endless continual growth. Instead, there is a consistent call to rest, sufficiency and care of creation. Already in the poetic portrayal of the beginning of all things, we encounter the Creator God resting on the seventh day after having worked for six (Genesis 2:3). One out of the Ten Commandments, God gives the early Israelites orders the entire nation to rest on the seventh day. This Sabbath order applied not only to human beings, including servants and slaves but even to the farm animals! (Exodus 20:8-11, also Exodus 31:12-17) In reference to this, Travis Reed affirms that every member of the community of creation, by virtue of their existence as God's beloved creation, deserve the right to refreshment" (Reed 2020).

Beyond people and animals, God's Law prescribed that the very land be granted rest. God tells Moses to lay it out clearly to the Israelites. "The land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord... The seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land..." (Leviticus 25:1-7). Of course, the capacity to rest is intimately tied to the reality and recognition of sufficiency, another Biblical theme which, in turn, is linked to trust in God's abundant provision. God responds to the complaints of the Israelites who are in the desert after being freed from Egypt by promising meat for the evening and bread from heaven in the morning. But the instruction is clear. Each day they are to gather precisely what they need for that day, except on the sixth day, when they are allowed to gather enough food for two days, so they would have enough for the Day of Rest. If they gathered too much, it would get wormy and rotten (Exodus 16). The matter of sufficiency also undergirds Jesus' admonishment to his disciples regarding worry about what they will eat or drink. He encourages them instead to seek God's kingdom and God's justice, and "all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:25-33)."

As Ruth Padilla DeBorst reviews, in his prescient book *Small is beautiful*, Ernst Schumacher challenges the assumption that progress consists of "ever-greater size, ever-higher speeds, and ever-increased violence, in defiance of the laws of natural harmony". We must strive, he continues, to redirect technological development "back to the real needs of man" "to the actual size of man. Man is small, and therefore, small is beautiful. To go for giantism is to go for self-destruction" (Padilla DeBorst 2010, 67). Yet further, "The chance of mitigating the rate of resource depletion or of bringing harmony into the relationships between those in possession of wealth and power and those without is non-existent as long as there is no idea anywhere of enough being good and more-than-enough being evil" (Padilla DeBorst 2010, 315). Our consumer society rests on and promotes unconstrained growth by instigating an unquenchable thirst for more. The connection between rest, a sense of limits and sufficiency, and care of the planet is obvious. As long as people's imagination and efforts are obsessive and insatiably focused on growth and accumulation, the earth will continue to be plundered, species will continue disappearing, land, air and water will continue being contaminated, and more and more people will be displaced by climate change. In sum, the Biblical call to Sabbath rest, sufficiency and creation care is a very strong counterpoint to the world's frenetic search for more consumer goods as the measure of well-being.

Beyond privilege to downward self-giving

The intense focus on poverty within the Christian development paradigm blinds us to the movement that is required of the rich and powerful. Poverty should certainly be alleviated, the poor should have credit available to them, they should be able to grow their incomes. Movement out of poverty is needed. At the same time, and this is the problem, the other side of the equation is rarely examined even though a descending movement from the wealthy and privileged is essential for a just distribution of the earth's goods.

A core theological theme throughout Scripture is that of a God who does not remain untouched by humanity and its plight but, instead, reaches into history by multiple means (through the Creation, the Law and the Prophets) and, finally, in the utmost expression of love, becomes human. Jesus Christ is the most powerful example of self-giving, as the ancient hymn recorded in Philippians 2 expresses. Jesus did not stand on the edge of heaven and reach a handout to the needy poor. He himself, God's only son, took on human form as a vulnerable infant in a working-class family in a conquered nation and was very quickly forced to seek refuge in a foreign land. In a context in which the emperor in Rome and the king in Jerusalem imposed their power on their subjects, Jesus inverts all expectations regarding leadership and teaches his disciples that greatness is measured by service (Luke 22:25-27 and Mark 10:41-45).

During his life on earth, Jesus, sovereign King and Lord over the cosmos, stooped down to befriend the most marginalized people in the society of his day: Samaritans, lepers, women, children, adulterers, tax collectors. Their plight stretched his human capacity to resolve their problems, to set things right, yet he dug deeper and deeper into a relationship. In the gospel accounts, we see him tired, needing to get away, to go into the wilderness to have time for prayer. We see him weeping and in states of exhaustion. Truly, we also see him lifting up the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Finally, Jesus died (Rotaru 2010,7), the most humiliating of deaths, as a criminal, and even allowed himself to be lowered into the depths of hell. All out of love. But many fail to see Jesus Christ himself moving down into our neighborhoods, into our lives, into the poor barrio, into the neighborhood, on the wrong side of the tracks. Jesus never stands on the edge of the pool trying to rescue someone while, at the same time, trying not to get wet. He is always sacrificing his power and privilege in order to bring others up.

Perhaps none of Jesus' disciples understood this better than the women who followed him. The book of Acts and the New Testament epistles portray how the early community of The Way embodied a leveling social relationship pattern in their assemblies and into their house churches (Padilla DeBorst 2020). Those who had shared with those who did not, so no one remained in need (Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-37). Surely there were conflicts and contestations but there is evidence that early communities were diverse, with rich and poor, slaves and free men and woman, Greek and Jew, Roman conquerors and their conquered neighbors joining together. These early assemblies startled the Roman Empire because they upset the family codes which held certain folks above others and relegated women, slaves, and children to the bottom rungs. Jesus's life had clearly convinced his early followers (Rotaru 2012, 5) that a new type of social relationships was necessary and possible. They devised the means to enact this imaginary, to live it out and this very quickly threatened the Roman imperial social order (Rotaru 2014, 51-86). In similar fashion, Christians today are called to seek justice by embodying self-giving, downward mobility.

Beyond predatoriness to debt forgiveness

Within the international development paradigm, the wealthiest nations arrange most of their international aid in the form of loans. Even the grants are usually structured in such a way that large portions of the money must be spent within the country making the grant. True debt forgiveness programs are few and far between. Since the fall of communism, a system in which the state performed a certain level of direct redistribution (predominantly benefiting itself rather than the individual members or families within society), there is little talk on the international scene about redistribution. Instead, countries are held hostage by predatory lending practices tied to policy prescriptions like taxation, privatization and other measures that favor corporate interests over the well-being of entire populations.

Economic relations were not only assumed in God's covenant with Israel but built explicitly into the Law God gave the people (Rotaru 2015, 318-322). The practice of Jubilee,

which included debt forgiveness, recovery of freedom for those who had lost it for whatever reason, and rest for the land, is clearly prescribed (Leviticus 25 and 27; Numbers 36:4). God gave Israel the imaginary and the technical means, the architecture, to carry out this radical reset of society over and over again. Although some scholars question to what extent it was implemented in Israel, there is evidence that debt forgiveness was often practiced in ancient societies. New rulers used debt forgiveness as a means to realign the loyalty of certain populations towards them instead of toward the original holders of the debt. The debtors were often the incipient merchant classes that were arising in these mainly agricultural societies.

When Jesus inaugurated his public ministry, he announced that, in him, “the year of the Lord’s favor” had arrived (Luke 4:19 and 21). This hearkened back to the announcement made centuries before by the prophet Isaiah and refers to the year of Jubilee (Isaiah 61:2). Although all too often, especially in Western Christian circles, these passages are spiritualized, debt, debtors, and forgiveness in concrete, economic terms is a common theme in Jesus’ teachings. In the case of Zacheus, the rich chief tax collector, the encounter with Jesus very naturally led him to economic discipleship: he promised to give away half his possessions to the poor and to pay back four-fold to anyone he had defrauded (Luke 19:1-10).

Sadly, Jubilee is not a very popular topic in Christian circles today. We leave that significant biblical theme to saints like Francis and Clare of Assisi, to radicals like Dorothy Day, or to left-wing campaigners for foreign debt forgiveness. Yet, if we want to address a world more unequal in wealth and income than at any other time, before the end of history, we will need to recover this practice.

Beyond singularity to polyvision

Another often unstated but operative assumption in international development is a singular formula for mending the situation of the poor. In addition to the problematic unidirectional intuition, this singularity of vision often disregards and silences alternative perspectives and in so doing impoverishes the entire endeavor. A Levelment paradigm gestures towards a humbler approach, appreciative of different contributions, even when they are offered by actors from outside the expected circles. Vandana Shiva denounces what she calls the “monocultures of the mind,” a reductionistic and colonizing mentality characteristic of the West and conducive to ecological and social destruction. Boaventura de Santos proposes an “ecology of knowledges,” in which Western rational thought is decentered and there is space for perspectives nurtured in other cultural settings. One such setting is that of the Andean indigenous people, who propose the Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir, Living Well) as a vision that transcends material consumption and instead emphasizes reciprocity and harmony in relation to the community and to nature, and values balanced sustainability within limits. Another cultural ideal is set forth by the Zulu and Xhosa cultures in what is now known as South Africa. Ubuntu is usually translated as “I am because we are,” and likewise emphasizes relationality and sustainability.

These views are far more concordant with much of the Hebrew culture and the values of God’s reign represented in Scripture than is the current globalized (Rotaru 2014, 532-541) consumer materialism that is excluding millions of people and grinding up nature. The question is if we are open to hear alternative voices over the noise of the current system. Are we receptive to the perspectives and contributions of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups rather than striving to impose a singular mode of thinking and being in the world?

The vision of the end times granted to John of Patmos and recorded in Revelation portrays “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 9:9).” There is no one singular culture but many. Revelation tells us that a polyphony of diverse voices will worship God in unison in the New Creation. And, given that God’s reign has already broken into human history (Rotaru 2023, 62-79), we can already begin singing that song by granting space for

people from all cultures to bring their perspectives and insights into the joint effort of exploring how to best evidence that reign in concrete ways.

Conclusion

What alternatives might be possible in a world mired in multiple crises? The development imaginary prescribes ongoing growth, which only produces practices that further social unbalance and ecological plunder. It is unsustainable. In contrast, a levelment imaginary, which recognizes rest and sufficiency, promotes divestment on the part of the haves in favor of those whom society has deprived, the pardoning of debts, and the contributions of a diversity of visions, opens up new horizons of economic and social practice that are far more realistic and attainable. The question is whether, like Zacchaeus, the few who have benefited from the unjust status quo are willing to follow Jesus in full economic discipleship.

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