OF AGENCY, ASSETS AND APPRECIATION: SEEKING SOME COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT.¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay pursues the dialogue between theological reflection and development theory. It argues, firstly, that the Christian concern for development must be rooted in the ‘vocation of the poor’, rather than in the compassion of the non-poor. Secondly, it explores the congruence between this theological idea and three key ideas in current development theory, namely, agency, assets and appreciation.

The call for Christians to be involved in some form of development action is perhaps best summarized by the powerful statement from James that, “just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead”. (James 2:26) This reminder that the Christian faith is not just about intellectual assent, but about a life lived in compassionate service to others, especially the vulnerable, sums up much of the Biblical witness from Moses and the Jubilee laws through to Jesus and the message of the Kingdom of God. This approach emerges as the key message in the vast array of writings calling the Church in Africa to be involved in issues of national reconstruction and social development.² Although

¹ This is a reworked version of the paper given at a colloquium in honour of John W. de Gruchy, “Fragments and connections: Theological and otherwise”, University of Cape Town, June 2003.
² See for example the following recent writing: Joseph T Agbasiere and B K Zabajungu (eds) Church Contribution to Integral Development. (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1989); R Koegelenberg (ed) Transition and Transformation: A Challenge to the Church (Cape Town: EFSA, 1994); B Pityana and C Villa-Vicencio (eds) Being the Church in South Africa Today. (Johannesburg: SACC, 1995); R Koegelenberg (ed) The Reconstruction and Development Programme: The Role of the Church, Civil Society and NGOs. (Cape Town: EFSA, 1995); I A Phiri, K A Ross and J L Cox,
Julius Nyerere penned these words thirty years ago, and in the sexist language of his time, we may take them as representative of this approach:

I am suggesting to you that unless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humiliation and degradation, then the Church will become irrelevant to man and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the Church, its members and its organizations, express God’s love for man by involvement and leadership in constructive protest against the present conditions of man, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die — and, humanly speaking, deserve to die — because it will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man.  

It would seem that faith, without the works of development, is not only dead, but it deserves to die.

**Whose faith? Whose works?**

There is, however, an unasked question lying at the heart of this approach that hides a key set of issues facing the Church in Africa as it seeks to be engaged in social development, namely, ‘whose faith and whose works are we talking about?’ The assumption underlying much of our theologizing about development is that Christians must do good things for those who are poor, less privileged, marginalized or helpless. These poor people are in need of our good works. We, who truly believe, need to roll up our sleeves, practice what we preach, and get involved in helping those who need help.

However, I am convinced that underlying this approach is the assumption that there is a divide between Christians and the needy that reflects a divide between actors and beneficiaries, agents and clients, doctors and patients, and ultimately the subjects and objects of history. This is what leads me to ponder: ‘whose faith and whose works?’ What about the faith of the poor, and more


importantly, what about their works? How is it that we have come to understand the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Sheep and Goats, and the message of James as being aimed at a class of people who can do, whereas we do not understand it as part of the message for the class of people who are perceived to be needy, to be 'not able to do', to be simply beneficiaries of the good deeds of others? And in making this fundamental assumption of being 'not able to do', are we not simply mirroring the power dynamics that lie at the heart of the experience of poverty, and hence reinforcing the very problem we think we are solving?

This approach strikes me as foolhardy for two important reasons, the second one of which is the central concern of this paper. But first, it is clear – from a purely descriptive point of view – that it is simply wrong to make the assumption that poor people are 'not able to do'. Poor people are always engaged in strategies and struggles for survival, adaptation and freedom. The insights of James Scott and Jean and John Comaroff, three scholars who have attracted the interest of South African theologians, have drawn attention to precisely this matter of acknowledging the agency of the poor. This theme has been taken up by (South) African theologians in a range of ways, as noted in a recent article, by Tinyiko Maluleke:

I suggest that we are being called to a humble but careful observance of the struggles of Africans to be agents against great odds, not by ignoring or discounting the odds, but by confronting them. Africans have always been agents, never 'simply victims, wallowing in self-pity'; they have always exercised their agency in struggles for survival and integrity. However, their agency has not always been recognised let alone nurtured. Speaking from a South African perspective, my sense is that there is a new wave of awareness of the agency of ordinary, marginalized Africans. In fact, at their best and most creative, African theologies have always proceeded on some gut-feeling and almost stubborn insistence that Africans were agents and no mere doormats trampled upon by civilisers, missionaries and colonialists.7

The point is well made. At the same time, however, Maluleke's reference to nurturing this agency leads us to speak of another reason why we would be


foolhardy to ignore the agency of the poor. This second, and more prescriptive reason is the central concern of this paper, namely, that the Gospel addresses the poor also with a call to translate their faith into works, and that this is crucial for the church’s involvement in social development everywhere, and especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. This means recovering the theological vision of the *vocation* of the poor themselves, as a key element for a contemporary theology of development. To do this we need to build upon the descriptive and interpretive task that helps us uncover this agency in the past (Maluleke speaks of “(a) acknowledging, (b) valorizing and (c) interpreting”) – but also to encourage it as a key element in the future (thus Maluleke adds, “(d) enhancing”).

To recover a theological vision of vocation, my sense is that we need to move beyond an isolated focus on identity, which has tended to dominate African theology in the past while, and seek to integrate issues of identity with a focus on agency. I am mindful of the fact that the theological concern with the identity of the poor is deeply rooted in the struggle against the European colonial and Christianizing enterprise and, in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, against apartheid. Against the overwhelming political, economic and ideological apparatus that was ranged against ordinary people, all of which sought to strip Africans of their identity, we can appreciate the political power of the appropriation of such simple theological truths such as: “I am a child of God. I bear his image. His Son died on the cross for me. He loves me as I am.” No one made this such a central theological theme in the struggle against apartheid than Desmond Tutu.

Yes, you are a God-carrier. God dwells in you. He dwells in me. That is why it is such a blasphemy for God’s children to be treated as if they were things, uprooted from their homes and dumped in arid resettlement camps... Those who are victims of injustice and oppression would not have to suffer from a slave mentality by which they despised themselves and went about apologising for their existence. They would know that they matter to God, and nothing anybody did to them could change that fundamental fact about themselves.9

Today, this kind of faith conviction may provide a powerful bulwark against the dehumanizing experiences of domestic violence, HIV infection, homophobia and unemployment.

**The Vocation of the Poor**

This conviction is of course absolutely true, but it is not the whole truth. One of the inherent problems embedded in it, rather ironically in the face of the colonial

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8 Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the agency of Africans”, 22
project, is that it can be a message of passivity. It claims a status before God by virtue of one's being. It says nothing about one's doing. And yet the issue of doing is crucially important for one's identity, particularly for the poor. Bryant Myers puts it like this:

When the poor accept their marred identity and their distorted sense of vocation as normative and immutable, their poverty is complete. It is also permanent unless this issue is addressed and they are helped to recover their identity as children of God, made in God's image, and their true vocation as productive stewards in the world God made for them...

Who we are is a question of both being and doing... I believe that poverty mars both parts of the identity of the poor. The result of poverty is that people who are poor no longer know who they are (being) nor do they believe that they have a vocation of any value (doing).10

It is important to recognise that in both creation accounts in Genesis, from which the affirmation of identity is traditionally drawn, the truth of being made in the image of God (1:27) or being filled with God's own breath of life (2:7) is immediately coupled with the theme of vocation, the calling to be responsible actors in this world newly created by God (1:28; 2:15). This understanding of vocation is at the heart of the theological understanding of labour as a constitutive part of what it means to be truly human, in the use of our gifts and talents to be co-workers with God in the world. From this is drawn the critique of alienated labour under slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism, and the vision of human beings working in harmony with God and the earth to create a better life characterized by justice and peace.11

Drawing from these same roots, and standing in this same trajectory, James reminds us that faith without works is dead. Thus any vision of Christian involvement in social development cannot have as its assumption, as so much of it unfortunately does, the faith and works of Christians and the Church over and against those who are poor and needy; but has to affirm, enhance and appreciate the faith works12 of the poor themselves. This is the message of the Gospel for the poor, that they are both made in the image of God and called to be actors in the drama of creation and salvation itself. They are not, and cannot be, simply passive objects of history, but are invited to be the subjects of their own history.

One of the most influential attempts to move this kind of concern for the vocation of the poor from a purely descriptive level to a prescriptive programme

10 Bryant Myers, Walking with the Poor (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 76 Italics added for emphasis.
for action is the work of the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire, as captured in his book concerning adult education, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Deeply influenced by his Roman Catholic faith and his partnership with the World Council of Churches, Freire promotes *humanization* as the good to which society should struggle, indeed as “the people’s vocation”\(^{13}\). Dehumanization is the process in which people are treated as ‘things’, as objects in other people’s worlds, and because there is a fundamental relationship between ends and means, the struggle for humanization must itself be humanizing. As he warns us, “to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie”\(^{14}\).

The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men and women. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings.\(^{15}\)

What makes us ‘human beings’, for Freire, is that we communicate, we have a *word*. “Dialogue imposes itself as the way by which [people] achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity”\(^{16}\). Thus the deepest act of dehumanization, of treating people as things, is to strip them of their word, to censor, to refuse to communicate, to shun dialogue. *Anti-dialogical action* is the antithesis of liberating praxis\(^ {17}\) and needs to be replaced with *Dialogical action*, for “dialogue, the encounter among men and women to name the world, is a fundamental precondition for their humanization.”\(^ {18}\) Dialogical action implies that the ‘oppressed’ (an admittedly wide and contested term for Freire) cannot be passengers on the journey, but find their own sense of freedom via their agency in the struggle for freedom. And because this is dialogical action, this agency is not simply expressed through action, in some sort of politburo-led, revolutionary cannon-fodder way, but also through reflection. For Freire it is crucial that the insights, perspectives, rituals and symbols of the poor contribute to the very vision of the future that is being sought. Action and theory thus find expression in liberating praxis:

> It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their condition as objects by the status of Subjects – the objective of any true revolution – requires that the people act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed.\(^ {19}\)

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14 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72
15 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50
16 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69
17 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 119-148
18 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 118
19 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 111
Freire's concept of dialogical action is not without the problems inherent in moving from a descriptive theory to a prescriptive programme. He is, after all, wanting to be a teacher rather than a journalist, and that implies a likely conflict around just what is taught, and how it is taught. The vocation of the teacher and the vocation of the poor are not necessarily in harmony! His pedagogical method works hard at these issues, seeking to get beyond the reality of hegemony and ideology; but any concept of 'dialogue' has to be extremely sensitive to be adequate enough to deal with all the implications of power represented in the teacher-pupil relationship, even (especially!) when these pupils are adults. Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, referred to above, reminds us that the authentic voice of the poor is not readily accessible simply through correct pedagogy. It is not even easily accessible through nuanced, and committed scholarship as pointed out by Gayatri Spivak's in her torturous but classic essay, “Can the subaltern speak?”20 In the face of precisely these concerns, Gerald West has sought to develop such a sensitive and programmatic notion of dialogue for Christians in his book, The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible.21

Having laid out the contours of a theological vision of the vocation of the poor, therefore, what I propose to do here is to build on this project by engaging with three key themes that are on the cutting edge of 'secular' development theory, and that engage with this vision. It is clear to me that much of the writing and thinking about the involvement of the Church in Africa in social development is long on biblical mandate, exhortation and liberatory passion, but it is rather weak in the area of such theory. We lack a coherent vision of development that will enable us to talk with and walk alongside African civil society as it seeks to engage in transforming the worlds in which we live. My hope is to reflect on agency, assets and appreciation as significant commonalities between theology and development.

Of Agency

An extremely influential thinker in contemporary development theory is Amartya Sen, the Nobel-Prize winning, Bangladeshi economist. Sen has drawn his thinking on poverty, famine, economics and development over the past two decades to a climax in his book, Development as Freedom.22 In this book he advances the fundamental argument that freedom is both the primary end, and the principal

21 Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2nd ed. 2003
22 Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (New York City, Random House, 1999), 282
means of development. He argues that freedom is, firstly, the goal of development, a “good thing in itself”. In page after page, he advances clear empirical evidence and economic theory to support his contention that development is nothing other than “the process of expanding human freedoms”. For Sen, freedom is not the opposite of ‘oppression’, but is rather opposed to unfreedom, a word he defines to include the full range of hindrances to human flourishing or ‘capability deprivation’. Freedom thus includes “elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivations as starvation, undertow, escapable morbidity and premature mortality as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on”. With this understanding of ‘human capabilities’ and the impact that freedom must have on the poor for it to be real freedom, Sen moves far beyond liberal notions of freedom, including those proposed by John Rawls.

Secondly, and perhaps of more importance to Sen and to us in this paper, freedom is also the primary means of development. For him, freedom is “a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness. Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development.” He notes that this affirms the ‘agency aspect’ of the individual, and his work supports what he calls an ‘agent-oriented view’:

In terms of the medieval distinction between ‘the patient’ and ‘the agent’ this freedom-centred understanding of economics and of the process of development is very much an agent-oriented view. With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programmes. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognizing the positive role of free and sustainable agency – and even of constructive impatience.

This insight leads Sen to stand firmly against the dominant neo-liberal paradigm that places economic concerns at the pinnacle of development strategies, and to argue for the preeminence of political freedoms and liberal rights over economic growth. Sen advances three reasons for this, namely that political freedoms (i) are of direct importance to human living; (ii) have an instrumental role in helping people get a hearing in expressing their claims to

23 Sen, Development as Freedom, 18
24 Sen, Development as Freedom, 36
25 Sen, Development as Freedom, 36
26 Sen, Development as Freedom, 18
27 Sen, Development as Freedom, 11
28 See his clear rejection of the view which “sees development as a ‘fierce’ process, with much ‘blood, sweat and tears’ – a world in which wisdom demands toughness”. Sen, Development, 35
29 Sen, Development as Freedom, 148
attention, and (iii) have a *constructive role* ‘in the conceptualization of needs’, including economic needs. This third reason has echoes of Freire’s understanding of praxis. Here Sen argues that freedom creates the space in which dialogue can occur so that people can be agents in shaping not only the struggle for development, but the very vision of what that ‘development’ might be:

Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticisms and dissent, are central to the process of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open debates and interchanges are permitted or not.\(^{30}\)

Sen recognizes like Freiré that if agency means anything, then it is not just a question of mindless action, but also of a contribution at the level of theory to ‘values and priorities’, so that the preferences for political, social and economic life can be shaped by all the citizens, including the poor, and not just the dominant elites: “The reach and effectiveness of open dialogue are often underestimated in assessing social and political problems”.\(^{31}\)

Sen illustrates and advances these insights when he considers the particular agency of women in social change. He is concerned that a focus simply on the sufferings and deprivations of women which society must somehow correct misses the point that what is at stake here is the *agency* of women. This agency has a role to play in dealing with the “iniquities that depress the well-being of women”, but more importantly, “the limited role of women’s active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people – men as well as women, children as well as adults”.\(^{32}\) Sen provides economic data to underscore his claim that the enhanced agency of women increases their own life expectancy, through claims within the household to better nutrition and healthcare\(^ {33}\), raises the mortality rates of children as well as reduces fertility rates through the influence that comes with education and literacy,\(^ {34}\) and relates directly to a reduction in violence crimes in a given society.\(^ {35}\) He writes:

The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relate to many of the central features of the development process...

Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an

\(^{30}\) Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 153

\(^{31}\) Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 153

\(^{32}\) Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 191


\(^{34}\) Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 195ff., 198f.

\(^{35}\) Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 200f.
adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of ‘development as freedom’.36

David Korten of the People Centred Development Forum shares many of the concerns of Amartya Sen in his important book, Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda,37 especially the priority of political over economic concerns on the development agenda, and the agency of the poor. For Korten, like Sen, these two are intrinsically linked. He is convinced that the dominant development paradigm, with its growth at any cost approach, has exacerbated the three major crises of the end of the twentieth century, namely, poverty, environmental stress, and communal violence. This dominant development paradigm “equates human progress with growth in the market value of economic output and subordinates both human and environmental considerations to that goal”.38 Against this, a new vision of transformation is needed, one that is shaped by the concerns of justice, sustainability and inclusiveness. For Korten, this is the agenda of a people-centred development vision, which sees development as a “people’s movement more than as a foreign-funded government project.”39

The people have been expected to put their faith and resources in the hands of government. In return governments have promised to bestow on the people the gift of development. This promise has proven to be a chimera born of false assessment of the capacity of government and of the nature of development itself.40

One of the upshots of this growing recognition is the emerging development role of civil society. But this is itself problematic. Korten surveys the plethora of organisations that make up civil society, and notes how many so-called development NGOs are serving agendas that do not promote people-centred development. One of the fundamental problems with civil society organisations is that they are at heart ‘third-party organisations’, i.e. they exist to meet the needs of people other than themselves.41 People’s Organisations (POs), on the other hand, are ‘first-party organisations’ and it is they who do and must play the central role in people-centred development. Self-reliant cooperatives, landless associations, irrigator associations, burial associations, credit clubs, labour unions,

36 Sen, Development as Freedom, 202f.
38 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 3
39 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 5
40 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 95
41 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 96
trade associations and political interest groups are among some of the collectives that may be POs.42

One of the crucial elements that they bring to the fore is that of citizen’s voluntary action, a central part of Korten’s vision as the title of his book suggests.

If transformation is to come, it must come as a consequence of voluntary action, an act of human commitment to collective survival driven by a vision that transcends the behaviours conditioned by existing institutions and culture. We must look to peoples’ movements as the key to transformational change in the current era.43

Korten does not use the term, agent or agency, but much of his insights into voluntarism and citizen’s action parallels the thinking of Freire and Sen around this concept, for it is in embracing such action that people become agents in their own development struggles. This agency aspect becomes clearer in Korten’s well-known typology of ‘four generations of voluntary development action’44 in which he charts a movement from (1) relief and welfare; through (2) small-scale, self-reliant local development; and (3) sustainable systems development; to (4) the fourth generation, namely, people’s movements. Thus, for Korten, fourth generation strategies look beyond those of the first three. “Their goal is to energize a critical mass of independent, decentralized initiatives in support of a social vision”.45

Of Assets

Sen and Korten, each in their own way and drawing on their own experiences and insights, have provided a framework for understanding the agency of the poor in development, and have thus rooted our theological vision of vocation within a wider discourse. Their thinking on this theme has enriched our understanding of development by providing ways in which we can understand and interpret development theory and praxis congruent with our faith. As we acknowledge the importance of the agency of the poor in development, so we must move on to ask what it is that the poor contribute to the process, and therefore to a consideration of assets and the insights of John Kretzmann and John McKnight in their paradigm-shifting workbook, Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets.46

42 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 100
43 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 105
44 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, Chapter 10, “From relief to people’s movement” 112ff.
45 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 127
Kretzmann and McKnight resonate with much of what we have noted above, when they point out that a key challenge in the task of development is to avoid building a dependency syndrome between poor needy people with lots of problems, and non-poor providers of services with lots of solutions. This kind of relationship leads to less and less confidence, dignity and empowerment for those who are on the margins of society, and so works counter to any real development of people and communities. They call this kind of approach, a ‘needs-driven dead end’, and propose in its stead the alternative path of ‘capacity-focused development.’ The traditional solution, or needs-driven approach sees communities as simply full of problems. Here we are confronted with images of needy, problematic and deficient people living in needy, problematic and deficient villages, slums or neighbourhoods. There is clearly some truth in this picture, but the traditional approach takes this to be the whole truth.

Many poor people come to accept this image of themselves, as needy people whose well-being depends upon being a client of service providers. They become consumers of welfare help, rather than producers of their own solutions. Their agency is undermined. The whole approach is guaranteed to create dependency, weaken the internal resources of a community, and lead to helplessness and despair. Problems in a community are not seen as symptoms of a deeper problem – the inability of a community to solve its problems. The more outsiders try to deal with the symptoms the more the real problem is made worse!

The simple truth that Kretzmann and McKnight identify is that you cannot build a community on what people do not have. Successful community development grows out of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of poor people and their neighbourhoods. It is important to clarify at the start that this does not mean that these communities do not need additional resources, or that they are ‘best left alone’ in some kind of warped understanding of ‘self-help’. What it does mean is that outside resources will be much more effective if local people are themselves investing and mobilizing their own resources, and are able to set the agenda for outside help on the basis of their strengths rather than weaknesses. The assets of poor communities “are absolutely necessary, but usually not sufficient” to meet the challenges of development.47

There are three kinds of assets in a village or neighbourhood, namely, individuals (their skills, gifts and financial resources), associations (the resources represented by churches, clubs, and local organisations, etc.) and institutions (libraries, schools, police stations, etc). For Kretzmann and McKnight the task of a community builder is to map these assets, and then to seek ways to build relationships among and between them, so as to strengthen the community’s own capacity to enhance its well-being. Thus the ‘three simple, interrelated

47 Kretzmann and McKnight, Building communities from the inside out, 8
characteristics’ of the approach are that it is (1) asset-based, in the sense that any development strategy starts with what is present rather than with what is absent in the community; (2) internally focused, with its stress upon “the primacy of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control”\(^{48}\); and (3) relationship driven, in that the challenge faced by community builders is to constantly build and rebuild the networks within the asset-base of the community.

Kretzmann and McKnight’s model has drawn on the “strong neighbourhoo rooted tradition of community organizing, community economic development and neighbourhoo planning”\(^{49}\) within the USA. Nevertheless, it exhibits some crucial affinities around the concept of assets with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), a widely used approach for understanding poverty in the third world. The SLF was first promoted by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, and since then the approach has received widespread support and use amongst development organizations such as the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the British government’s Department For International Development (DIFD), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the People Centred Development Forum (PCD Forum), Oxfam, and importantly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).\(^{50}\)

We cannot here provide a comprehensive analysis of the framework as a whole,\(^{51}\) and will simply reflect upon some key elements around our theme of assets. The SL approach recognizes that poor and vulnerable people are agents in rather than clients of their development, and it does so by working with the already existing portfolio of assets of the household and the community, as well as the livelihood strategies that are already in place. Along with Kretzmann and McKnight, it recognizes that you cannot build a community on what people do not have. Working with the assets and relationships that already exist in development efforts “a key objective is to remove the constraints to the realization of potential. Thus people will be assisted to become more robust, stronger and better able to achieve their own objectives”.\(^{52}\)

At the household and community level, the SLF draws our attention to the portfolio of five key livelihood assets that people have access or entitlement to. These are:

\(^{48}\) Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building communities from the inside out*, 9

\(^{49}\) Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building communities from the inside out*, 9


\(^{52}\) Mark Butler and Ran Greenstein, *Sustainable Livelihoods: Towards a Research Agenda for the Church Land Programme*. (Johannesburg: Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 1999), 46
Human Capital, the skills, knowledge, good health, and ability to labour. It is the foundational asset that is necessary, though not sufficient, for positive livelihood outcomes.

Social Capital, the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives. It includes networks and connectedness, more formal group membership and trust, reciprocity and exchange.

Natural Capital, the natural resources that are available to households and communities in pursuit of their livelihoods. It includes everything from intangible public goods such as the atmosphere to direct resources such as trees and plants.

Physical Capital, the infrastructure and producer goods that are required to support livelihoods. Infrastructure is only an asset in so far as it helps the poor to meet their needs.

Financial Capital, the money that is available to the household, in a range of forms such as cash, livestock, jewelry, or the regular inflows of money. This is the most versatile asset, as it can be converted into other assets, and it can contribute directly to livelihood outcomes like purchasing food or medicines, or through leveraging social and political influence.

The SL Framework does not make a distinction between the micro and the macro levels of development activity. “The SL approach, by using both participatory and policy (cross-sectoral) tools, highlights the inter-linkage between livelihood systems at the micro level and the macro policies which affect these livelihoods.”

As Butler and Greenstein put it, the SL approach emphasizes the importance of macro level policy and institutions to the livelihood options of communities and individuals. It also stresses the need for policy development and planning to be informed by lessons learnt and insights gained at the local level. This will give local people a stake in policy and increase overall effectiveness.

The SLF does this through its concept of the ‘vulnerability context’. Apart from this typology of the portfolio of assets available to poor households and communities, the articulation of this ‘vulnerability context’ in which households and communities exist is the other extremely helpful contribution of the SLF to our discussion about assets. This is an immediate recognition that we are dealing with people who are at risk, not because they are stupid or lazy, but because their portfolio of assets and their livelihood strategies are subject to a range of influences that prescribe and determine the opportunities and choices that they have for their livelihood strategies. We suggest that there are three key elements that make up this wider context of livelihoods.

53 UNDP, Sustainable Livelihoods, 6
54 Butler and Greenstein, Sustainable Livelihoods, 46
Shocks, stresses, seasonality, such as civil war, stock-market collapse, a livestock disease such as foot and mouth, a flood, drought or even the onset of freezing weather.

Policy, Laws, Institutions, referring to the intentional structures, institutions, formations and contracts that are set in place to regulate social and communal life.

Culture, Religion, Customs. It is clear that in most African contexts, the portfolio of livelihood assets, the livelihood strategies, and the desired livelihood outcomes are deeply influenced by these elements, and any strategy that desires to enhance such livelihoods ignores them at its peril.

These three elements of the wider vulnerability context make the important link between the micro and macro levels of development. It is vital to see the asset portfolio of the local household or community in relationship to the institutions, organizations, policies, legislation, culture, religion and customs that shape livelihoods. These provide the reality in which the community resides, and which therefore has a direct link to the household, and the asset portfolio. Out of the vulnerability context, with the three elements mentioned above shaping and constraining their possible responses, people make use of their asset portfolio to pursue livelihood strategies. The result of this is a range of livelihood outcomes that could include more income, increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, improved food security and a more sustainable use of the natural resource base.

Chambers and Conway argue that a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term.

One of the issues that emerges in our reflection on the SLF that is of importance for this paper, concerns the role and place of religion. Within the framework, religion is moved out of the household and community level and into the


56 Chambers and Conway, Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: 7
'vulnerability context', with the assumption that it serves as a wider constraining net in which people construct their livelihood strategies. We are bound to ask if this is an adequate representation of reality, particularly in Africa. Is it not possible that religion, faith or spirituality functions as part of the asset portfolio, i.e. is something that people 'have' which they actively utilize in their livelihood strategies? Some may argue that this is present in the categories of Human capital and Social Capital. One may, however, question if this foregrounds the role of religion and religious assets in the most appropriate way. For example, Kretzmann and McKnight have no hesitation in recognizing that some of the key assets in any community are the local religious institutions.

Each particular religious institution offers a unique configuration of specific resources which can be utilized in the process of community building. Yet every religious institution, whether large or small, urban or rural, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or other always offers certain common sets of resources which can be mobilized effectively to assist in community renewal.57

This insight opens the way for us to begin to think of religion in itself as an asset for people, and especially for poor people, and even more especially for poor African people. I believe that this is a creative way in which we can understand the work of Beverley Haddad in her research amongst poor women in Vulindlela, KwaZulu-Natal.58 She makes the point that

... in planning programmes of development action, faith as an integral part of women's lives must be acknowledged as a community resource. Networks of religious women such as the manyano movement are a key site of survival practice and a place where poor and marginalized women are taking control of their lives. This movement accounts for one of the largest religious groupings of indigenous African women in South Africa. Through these churchwomen's prayer groups, poor and marginalized women find courage, strength and resources to persevere in the face of near death.59

Likewise, in a recent conference paper, Jim Cochrane has drawn attention to religious health assets, which he labels as "a kind of endogenous resource that may be leveraged for dealing with health crises as part of public health policy and practice".60 His paper makes clear, through his contextual grounding of his theory in a case study of the historically black settlement of Imizamo Yetho,
Hout Bay, Cape Town, that these assets are not just those of large, rich and powerful institutions, but are rooted in the lives of the poor and marginalized.

**Of Appreciation**

Clearly the relationship between faith, agency and assets presents itself with many creative possibilities in our desire to understand and be engaged in social development. Yet it does pose the question as to how we are to proceed, and what the role of ‘outsiders’ is within the process. An insight into the changed nature of the approach of outsiders towards the poor due to a growing awareness of their agency and assets can be gained by following the shift from Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to Participation Learning and Action (PLA). The first approach, RRA, was an investigative method used by outside experts to quickly gauge the development needs of a given community through on-the-spot field work. This was itself an innovation, namely, the idea that it was better to send someone to go and look at the situation on the ground, (however quickly) than simply to sit in a government office and make plans on paper!

However, as the RRA approach was applied it began to be shaped by a range of concerns, key of which was the recognition, by development activists, of the value of the insights and wisdom of the poor people who were the subjects of the appraisal. The PRA approach grew out of this, and the ‘rapid’ was replaced with ‘participatory’, signaling a conscious desire to both spend more time amongst the people in the community in an attempt to really try and understand ‘what is going on’, and to encourage the active participation of the poor in the process of appraisal itself. A whole range of creative exercises was developed to facilitate this process.  

The success of PRA tools and exercises meant that use was found for it in urban areas, and so the ‘rural’ part of the title seemed redundant. Furthermore, the concept of appraisal continued to carry within itself a clear distinction between the subjects and objects of research, a distinction that fails to recognise that both development facilitators and poor people are engaged in a mutual learning process. Again, this process of participatory learning is not for its own sake, but for the goal of social, cultural and economic transformation of poverty. Thus the term ‘action’ was added, to create ‘Participatory Learning and Action’. This movement from RRA to PRA to PLA, is responsive to the growing recognition of the role of the agency and assets of the poor in development, for as Bryant Myers notes,

“from the results of a properly done PLA exercise the poor can discover how much they really do know, what resources and skills they already have, and how resourceful they have been in the past.”

Indeed, these tensions between the RRA, PRA and PLA approaches raise to prominence the vital relationship between giving priority to the agency and assets of the poor on the one hand, and the way in which non-poor outsiders can engage with the poor in the mutual struggle for justice in such away that this agency and these assets are not compromised. For the very act of compromising the agency and assets is itself an act of injustice. Now we begin to come full circle in this paper, for this was the issue we noted in our reflection on Paulo Freire and his educational method, namely, the tension between the vocation of the teacher and that of the pupil, expressed now as the tension between the vocation of the poor and the vocation of the development agent.

This search for a process by which the agency and the assets of the poor can be enhanced in dialogue with outsiders, has given rise in some quarters to what is known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and which bears some resemblance to the work of Freire and others in adult education. The fact that this approach has been adopted by, amongst others, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) to enhance its use of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, should alert us to the congruence between it and the focus on the agency and assets of the poor. Neil Ford of the IISD makes precisely this point when he points out (in language remarkably similar to that of Kretzmann and McKnight) that the dominant model of development practice is a problem-centred one that “can often disempower the community it is meant to help, by conditioning local people to view their village as a place full of problems that only outsiders can solve, and needs that only government can meet”. The SLF, on the other hand, helps people understand their strengths, analyze their options, plan effectively and participate more equally; and AI becomes the way in which development agencies can facilitate this.

Appreciative inquiry starts from a fundamentally different – and more positive – point. It is designed to help local people identify their achievements. This process can be very empowering for people who have always considered themselves poor and disadvantaged. When they look for their strengths, they are often amazed to discover how resilient, adaptive and innovative they are. They have to be – poverty is a cruel and unforgiving circumstance. By focusing on their strengths they can use the ‘positive present’ to build a shared vision of a better future, one that is grounded in reality. Appreciative inquiry creates a development pathway based on what is right rather than what is wrong.

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62 Myers, *Walking with the poor*, 174
64 Neil Ford, “Foreword”, vi
The AI approach makes creative use of memory and visioning around four stages, namely, (1) **discovering**, which explores and appreciates what has been good in the past and what works at present,\(^65\) (2) **dreaming** about what might be if the good could be expanded into the future; (3) **dialogue** amongst the participants to construct a vision of what can be achieved; and (4) **delivery** of the vision through action. The circle continues, as this action itself becomes the focus of discovery. As with the Asset-Based approach and the SLF, Appreciative Inquiry does not minimize the problems that beset a community. Quite clearly the process takes place within and seeks to overcome experiences which threaten ‘the good’. However, instead of being incapacitated by the overwhelming sense of deficit, AI is driven by what Charles Elliot calls the ‘heliotropic principle’, which states that organizations operate like plants: they move toward what gives them life and energy”\(^66\).

The outsider who seeks to assist through the AI approach, will therefore approach poor people and communities exhibiting some of the following characteristics:

- An assumption of health and vitality
- A desire to connect through empathy
- A sense of personal excitement, commitment and concern
- An intense focus to listen with the right side of the brain
- Generative questioning, pointing toward clues and guiding
- Belief in the community and its story
- Tolerance for ambiguity, generalization and dreams
- A passion for dialogue and a dislike of monologue\(^67\).

I am surely not alone in wishing that this list were simply the job description of the ordained clergy in my church! And, of course, by implication of all baptized Christians!

**Theological Themes**

This intuitively positive reaction to the approach of Appreciative Inquiry suggests that we may have succeeded in our task. This was to explore the commonalities

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\(^{65}\) This seems to similar to the focus of contemporary African theology as noted by Maluleke above. See “The Rediscovery of the agency of Africans”

\(^{66}\) Charles Elliot, *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry* (Winnipeg: IISD, 1999), 43

\(^{67}\) David Cooperider and Suresh Srivastva from an article, “Appreciative Inquiry in Organization Life” quoted in Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 177.
between the secular language of agency, assets and appreciation and theological themes so that as Christians we can begin to understand, interpret and engage with development practice alongside other role players in African civil society. In doing this we have done two things: (1) We have explored these three themes in some depth, and noted how central to current development thinking they are; and (2) we have seen how the three themes share a common vision, namely the affirmation of the humanity and vocation of the poor, their role in the struggle for humanization, the gifts they bring to this struggle, and the role of the non-poor outsider in affirming this humanity, role and gifts.

We began by being reminded of James’ strident words: “Faith without works is dead” (2:26). Throughout this paper we have been reminding ourselves that this is not only a word for the non-poor, a call – as it were – to charitable acts towards the unfortunate poor who have no works of their own (and, by implication no faith). It is also a word for the poor. They too gain dignity when addressed by the fullness of the gospel. It is not enough that they have faith. Faith without works is dead. The gospel calls them to engage in the works of love, peace and justice in the struggle for their own humanization. This, as Freire reminds us, is the ‘true generosity’ that must be at the heart of any contemporary theology of development:

True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life,’ to extend their trembling hand. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and working, transform the world.68

68 Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 27.
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