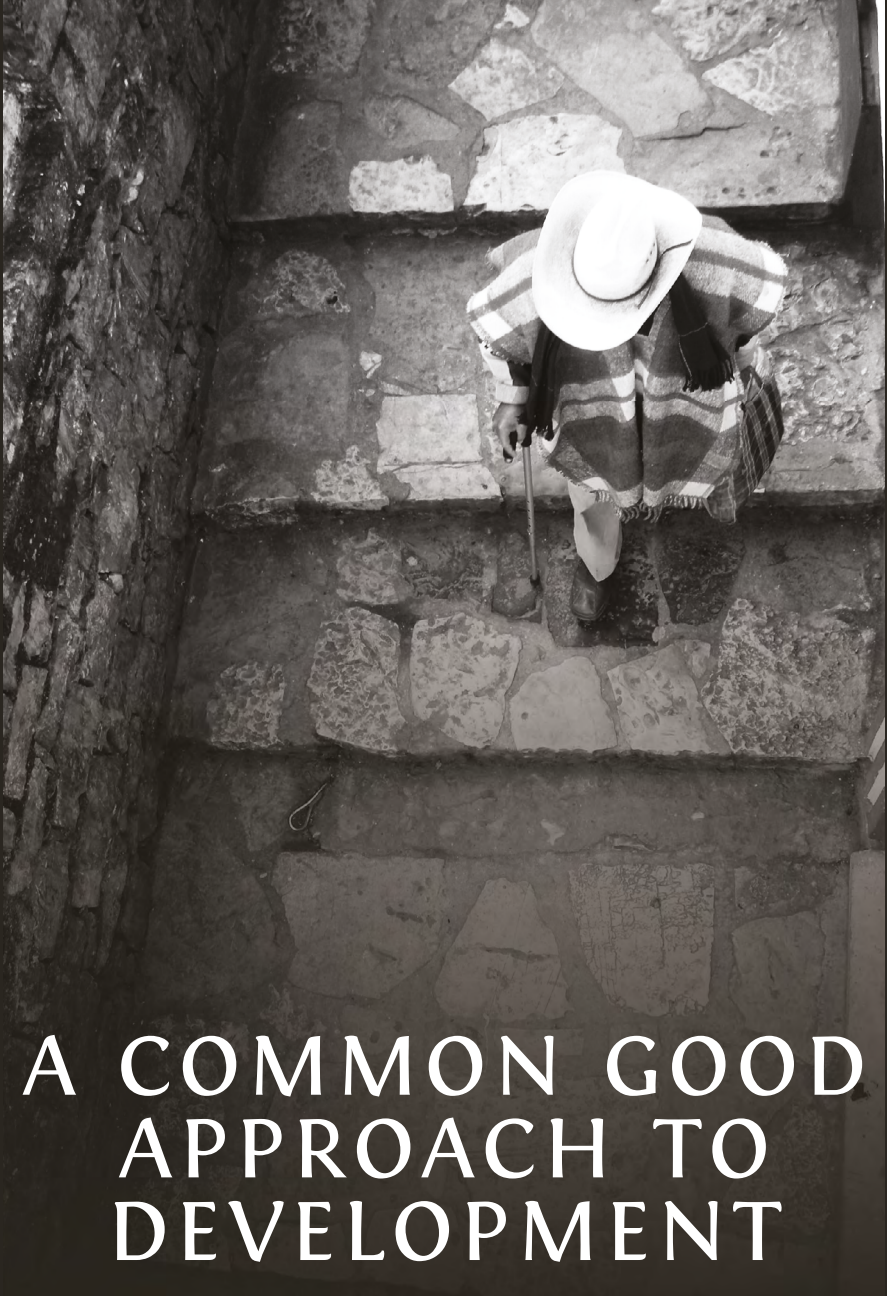EDITED BY MATHIAS NEBEL,
OSCAR GARZA-VÁZQUEZ AND CLEMENS SEDMAK

A COMMON GOOD APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

Collective Dynamics of Development Processes

Cover image: Cuetzalan, Puebla (2008). Photo by Oscar Garza-Vázquez.
Cover design by Anna Gatti

9. Do We Need a Common Good Approach to Development?

Helen Alford

1. Let's Start with Two Stories

Over thirty years ago now, I became acquainted with a professor of English in a university in the US. Teaching English did not pay very well so he earned his real income from teaching courses in marketing communication. In one lecture, he showed his students an advertisement with a picture of a woman wearing a pair of jeans. The implication of the picture, reinforced by the text that went with it, was that young women wearing these jeans become more attractive to the opposite sex. He pointed out that nothing was said about the kind of material from which the jeans was made, nor was any other information given about the nature of the product. He then said something which stunned his students: "this message is clearly a species of lying". As he continued to explain why, the atmosphere in the classroom became colder and colder, until finally one of the students in the class raised her hand and asked "what's wrong with selling dreams?"[1]

And then there is the story of Ian Goldin (2018), the author of the *Very Short Introduction* on development, which he recounts in his talk at Google. In both, he synthesises the current state of play on development in a way that only someone who has dedicated his life to it could manage,

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1   Indeed, a quick check of the search term 'selling dreams' in any search engine on the Internet will bring up videos aimed at sales people with titles like 'Sell dreams not products', and articles with titles like 'Selling Dreams is the Secret to Customer Loyalty'.

someone who was exiled from South Africa during apartheid and who never thought he would see his country change—until it did. Yet, despite all that he has seen and done, the most emphatic statement in his talk is: "ideas are the driving force of history". The way we think about the world and about ourselves within it creates the framework within which we can imagine something new and better (a 'more developed' state).

Why open with these stories? Well, stories can impress us with a truth that can elude us in reading purely academic texts. In the first story, we can see the power of selling dreams. The students were shocked that the professor should 'unmask' this process; they did not feel gratitude to him for having opened their eyes to how they were being sold illusions. Indeed, they *wanted* to be taken in by the advertisement, so that they could aspire to the dream it promised. At the same time, aspiring to a dream seems good. The young people could be forgiven for finding their professor's criticism unhelpful. Even though the professor's contention seems right, it still doesn't seem easy to side with him against the students. Insofar as development is about aspiring to a dream—a world that could be, but which is not yet—this story raises a crucial point for us here. What development dreams are 'true' (not lies)? And why does a dream that, on one level, we can see as a lie, still seem to inspire us? We will come back to this intriguing and vexing problem towards the end of this chapter.

Goldin's comment—"ideas are the driving force of history"—leads us to the main issue we will discuss here: the way we think about development will be a driving force behind that development itself. Changing our ideas, or what I would like to call our 'mindset', that is, an integrated set of ideas for understanding what we need to do—can change our history. Real improvement in our mindset may thus bring about real change for the better in our history.

My main argument in this chapter is that we face development today within a mindset that was largely defined during the Enlightenment of the 1700s, and which is no longer fit for purpose. The mindset that was synthesised during the Enlightenment became a powerful driving force, changing history and driving many improvements.[2] We only have to look at many parts of the world that have not been through the processes

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2   Among the many texts that could be mentioned here, Larry Siedentop's (2014) is particularly enlightening.

generated by the Enlightenment to see the difficulties with which they must often contend today, including nepotism, a lack of meritocracy and difficulty in maintaining the rule of law. The Enlightenment mindset has a lot going for it. However, like all other syntheses of this kind, it was at least in part a product of its time and of the problems that needed resolving then, so it was focused on resolving some issues and not others. Its key issue was individual freedom: for all sorts of good normative and historical reasons, defending the freedom of the individual had become a central problem by the time we arrived at the eighteenth century. Let's look briefly at two consequences of this mindset. Firstly, if individual freedom is central, the social systems of which individuals are a part become problematic. Such systems become a real, or at least a potential, threat to the exercise of that freedom, and ways have to be found to keep that threat at bay. Secondly, protecting individual freedom means protecting the possibility for each individual to define for themselves what the goals or purposes of their life should be. Social problems then become reduced to economic and procedural questions, because we can only share with each other *how* we achieve the goals of our lives, not what those goals are. This mindset also did other things which both allowed us to make progress and created collateral problems for us. Focusing on these key elements, however, can help us identify some of the strengths of this mindset, as well as its limitations, in the face of the problems we must face today.

In the 1700s, we still had very powerful systems of social control, which operated through the local communities of which people were a part and involved the religious traditions to which those communities belonged. The industrial revolution had not yet begun; the mass of poor people in every country far outnumbered the small number of aristocrats and the new, rising 'middle' classes. It was quite reasonable to see the need for more individual freedom as crucial, and to reduce social problems to economic ones, with the creation of wealth as the key 'development' issue.

Nowadays, we face problems that are very different. We might even go so far as to say that our problems are the mirror image of those of the eighteenth century. We face pressing social problems like inequality and systemic existential crises like climate change. Our difficulty today is to find shared solutions to these problems, harmonising the exercise of

our individual freedom with a common goal—a good life lived together, and a life-giving relationship with our environment. We cannot avoid these problems anymore, but our inherited mindset was not designed to deal with them. Just as the Enlightenment thinkers recognised that what they had inherited was not fit for purpose in their day, and developed a new mindset to confront their problems, so now we need to recognise that what they bequeathed to us is not able to give us the basic vision we need to confront our problems.

If we look at development questions, we can see reflections of these issues in the literature.

We are in a context where development is seen primarily through the lens of the 2030 Agenda and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. On the one hand, this agenda is the result of a long process of negotiation, and in many ways is a really remarkable achievement. Yet we can see problems with it that changing the mindset we are talking about here could help us resolve, such as thinking about human development as a final goal, and the integration of the sustainable development goals.

Human development emerged in a powerful way within the development discourse with the launch of the Human Development Reports in 1990. The new 'Human Development Index' was a symbolic triumph; the report's initiator, Mahbub ul-Haq, correctly understood that an alternative indicator was needed to rival GDP, in order to have any chance of drawing attention to a human development agenda. It consisted of a combination of measures dealing with income, education and health. However, the text of the 1990 report did not have a clear definition of human development, and did not always refer to it in the same terms as the index measured it. Near the beginning of the 'Overview' of the report, we read: 'Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices are to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect' (UNDP 1990). This last phrase shows that the idea of human development was not resolved between two positions: one focused on freedom of choice (building on the Enlightenment mindset we have been discussing), and the other focused on the substantive or normative issues of life expectancy, health, education, and a decent standard of living. The

tension between these two positions is captured in the last phrase just cited: 'Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect'. Can 'guaranteed human rights' really be called an 'additional choice'? The text tries to hold together the idea of human development as the widest possible choice with the idea that it consists in certain forms of substantive change (what Sen would call improved 'capabilities'). The contradictions between these two are not easy to resolve. It is not a surprise, therefore, that subsequent HDRs did not try to do so. Similarly, while the 2030 Agenda aims to create an overarching approach to sustainable development, in practice the various sustainable development goals were not negotiated as an integrated set and are the results of various negotiation processes (e.g., see Dodds et al. 2017). Each goal has its own logic and its own targets which have been affected by the jockeying between interests in arriving at them. At least potential contradictions exist within them, such as between the goal for decent work and economic growth (Goal 8) and climate action (Goal 13); the hope is, of course, that these tensions will be resolved *in via*. There are the five transversal dimensions (people, planet, prosperity, peace, partnership), and Goal 17 does focus attention on partnership towards the achievement of the goals, so there is attention to some kind of practical integration, on the operational level. At the same time, this is not the same as being able to explain the unity between the goals as part of an integral vision and mindset.

These are very complex issues that cannot be resolved only by a change in mindset. Nevertheless, as Goldin suggests, our mindset influences our capacity to act and to imagine how we could change and develop. We can introduce new techniques for measuring development progress or progress towards a common good, but if we do not link those measures to a changed mindset or frame of mind, supported by a community of living that carries these ideas forward, we are doing what we have often seen before—we change the name of something, we change *how* we do things in some way, we may change the measurement tools and indicators, but we do not address the ultimate, underlying, fundamental question on which the name, the way of doing things and the measurement system depend—the question of *what* we want to do and *why* we want to do it.

The mindset we need now should not throw out all that has been achieved using the individualistic mindset adopted during the

Enlightenment. Much has been achieved within that philosophical approach, even if it always had limitations, limitations which have now become untenable and which are leading to an unsustainable way of life. Instead, we need to build on it, keeping what is good in it, but opening it up in two main ways. Firstly, we need to recognise a 'bigger' view of the human being. Our individuality is real, but so is our intrinsic relationality. Much empirical research in the field of happiness shows that we can only really achieve our goals in communion with others, not just because others provide us with economic or other goods that allow us to achieve our individual goals, but because our relationships in themselves are important.[3] Loneliness and its related mental health problems are becoming some of the key problems blocking our development, particularly in more wealthy countries (McDaid et al. 2017). Our competition with each other for our individual needs demonstrates our individuality, while the happiness research demonstrates our relationality. GDP and other measures of wealth can increase, but our happiness and sense of wellbeing may not. By recognising that we have both individual (material) and relational (non-material, spiritual) dimensions—by bringing the relational/ spiritual dimension back into the picture—we can begin to imagine development in social and systemic ways, allowing us to give individual freedom its proper place within a bigger, more sustainable picture of human flourishing.

Secondly, we need to bring back a sense of working towards a common goal, and creating a common good together, on the basis of which all of us can achieve our individual goals. With a shared goal or purpose, we have the chance to unite our fragmented sustainable development goals into a unified picture, each one of them being achieved as part of an overall development goal. The drive to re-introduce thinking about our overall goal or purpose is most clearly displayed today in business, where the idea that businesses need a 'purpose' that inspires them beyond making money and which can guide them in aligning themselves to a genuine development agenda (many of them try to show how their strategies are aligned to the sustainable development goals) is now widely discussed

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3   See the series of World Happiness Reports starting in 2012, available at https:// worldhappiness.report/. See also the results taken over a lifetime from the Harvard Study of Adult Development https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/.

and adopted.[4] Achieving social and environmental goals is no longer a side activity or an optional extra for socially-aware business managers—it has become core to achieving the good of the business as a whole, as a part of the wider society. 'Business cannot succeed in societies that have failed' is a phrase that circulates widely in the business world today.

The practical relevance of this synthesis between a renewed view of the human being, seen as a 'duality' of individual and relational, and of the common good, providing us with a goal towards which to work and on the basis of which individual goods can be achieved, can be demonstrated in the success of a movement known as the 'Blueprint for Better Business'. Founded in the UK in 2012, Blueprint works with some of the leading FTSE 100 companies, helping them to define and operationalise a purpose that builds on the dignity and duality of the human person and promotes the common good.[5] Focusing on mindset change—the 'why' and 'what for' of purpose—it does not aim at producing new tools for being a purposeful business—the 'how' of purpose—which is what many consultants and coaches do. Instead, Blueprint draws together key elements to help businesses change their mindset from two fundamental sources: firstly, key ideas from the millenarial 'wisdom traditions' represented by the great world religions and the great philosophical systems, like Aristotelianism and Confucianism, which have stood the test of time and which were often sidelined at the time of the Enlightenment, and secondly, modern scientific results that challenge the Enlightenment mindset but which converge in the direction of the ideas proposed by these ancient traditions of thought.[6] Although Blueprint has focused on businesses, its mindset has wider significance, and could be applied in the public and non-profit sectors, and to development as a whole. In applying this mindset, Blueprint has seen leading financial businesses ask themselves 'what is the right level of profit for our business?', and commit themselves to gaining economic returns from creating social value.[7] It has seen others

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4   See, for instance, the results of 'The Future of the Corporation' programme of the British Academy, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation/.

5   https://www.blueprintforbusiness.org/.

6   The idea of the 'wisdom traditions' was taken from the book by R. J. Blomme and B. van Hoof (2014).

7   In an interesting parallel, see the comment on finding 'how much profit is enough' for a financial institution from the CEO of Nationwide Building Society in the 2020

identify various options for how they could become more responsible, ranging from 'being a follower', to 'being a leader', to 'using our position to create a coalition to change the game, to raise the standard for the whole of our sector', and committing to being either the second or the third. In the context of the pandemic, it has seen major companies that had previously committed to paying all their workforce a living wage maintain that commitment, despite the economic shock experienced, by cutting the salaries of those higher paid in the business. Given the ever-widening impact of Blueprint, and given that the mindset change it wants to bring about focuses on resolving the social and systemic problems we face today, we will present the Blueprint mindset as an example of the direction in which we need to go, and then comment on it with regard to the problematic issues in the field of development that we highlighted above.

A Changed Mindset[8]

Our first issue is to discuss how a human being can be both an individual and intrinsically relational at the same time, with two integral yet distinct aspects of being human. In a theory known as 'personalism', which is a twentieth-century development within a tradition of thought that dates back over two thousand years and is often called 'Aristotelian-Thomistic', we find the human being presented as two-dimensional: one dimension is 'individual' and the other is 'personal' or 'relational'. In philosophical thought, and even in general conversation, we are used to talking about two dimensions of the human being, but we usually use terms like 'body and soul' or 'matter and spirit', distinguishing between a material and an immaterial aspect. In the personalist view, the way of thinking about the 'soul' or 'spirit' is slightly developed, for it is this dimension which is 'intrinsically relational', that is, it is the dimension through which we relate to others as part of who we are, not only as useful to us in obtaining what we need as individuals.

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publication of the UK's Financial Conduct Authority, *Driving Purposeful Cultures*, https://www.fca.org.uk/publication/discussion/dp20-1.pdf.

8   The mindset used in Blueprint draws on many resources, but two in particular are worth mentioning here: Maritain and Jacques (1947), and Alford and Naughton (2001).

As physical individuals, we are needy and fragile. Other individuals, needy and fragile like we are, will be in competition with us for the scarce goods that we need to satisfy our individual needs. These are not only material goods—money, a place to live, adequate food and healthcare—but also positions in hierarchies, giving us status and social approval. If we feel that we are threatened in any of these ways—a threat to our wealth, or to our position in a social system that is important to us—we can become defensive or even aggressive. All of this is part of who we are, and is well-attested to in the scientific literature. At the same time, much scientific literature also tells us that we are relational. One of the most striking sets of scientific results on this point comes from the happiness literature, as we already mentioned. This shows us that it is in our relationships with others that we find the deepest fulfilment and satisfaction. Our relational dimension, which is the spiritual or non-material aspect, is almost the opposite of our individual dimension—instead of being fragile and needy, it has a kind of interior energy and super-abundance; instead of being threatened by others, it looks to relationships with others as gifts, as forms of enrichment; it moves outwards, constantly transcending itself, looking outside itself for relationships with others simply because they are good in themselves.

It seems like these two dimensions are contradictory, especially when we think about how we relate to others. How can we be fragile and needy, in competition with others and potentially threatened by them, while, at the same time, being strong and overflowing with energy, cooperating with each other in building relationships that bring us long-lasting fulfilment? Well, the first thing to say is that the scientific results tend to show that we are like this, that we do relate to others in these two ways *at the same time*. The results of the games that game theorists get people to play, for instance, show that we can put more or less emphasis on our capacity to compete or to cooperate, depending on the circumstances that we are put in. For instance, if we feel that our counterpart, our player, is not trustworthy, we will tend to start protecting ourselves. If, however, we receive a gift, something that we do not feel that we deserved, we are inclined to share it with others, to pass on our good fortune, not to hoard it for ourselves.[9] Secondly,

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9   See an interesting discussion about the result of games in relation to our mindset in Ghoshal (2005, pp. 75–91).

we can note that there are also examples of other theories that seem to rely on contradictory elements. Perhaps the most famous is the theory of the wave-particle duality of light. There are some experiments that physicists have done with light that they can only explain if they think of light as a particle, while there are others (such as when light bends) that they can only explain if they think of light as a wave. We cannot get to a simpler explanation of what light is: we can only say that it displays the characteristics both of a particle (or quantum) and of a wave. In his writings, Maritain uses other analogies. For instance, he uses the example of a work of art, which is at one and the same time a material object that is made up of various chemical substrates and a source of inspiration and enlightenment to us. Games are full of competition, but only work if the players cooperate with each other by keeping the rules, and the whole idea of 'sportsmanship' goes beyond adherence to rules. In all these examples, things that are contrary, or at least completely different, are found at one and the same time in the same object or activity.

With the idea of the human being in two dimensions, individual and intrinsically relational, we are able to think differently about the common good too. We can create goods between us, as part of our intrinsically relational side, which are held in common between us. Since relationships can be intrinsically important to us, part of who we are, we can work towards genuinely shared objectives (as friends do) from which we both gain something individually, but, more fundamentally, we both gain together. Friendships either exist between friends or they do not exist at all, and only on the basis of their shared friendship do friends gain individually from their bond. This happens in the wider society too, when we are working towards a common, shared objective. When different groups cooperate together in different ways in a local community, for instance—politicians, local government officials, working people, local investors, suppliers, customers and so on—it is only on the basis of what they achieve together (the success of the life of the community itself) that they can each get something out of it individually (perhaps career advancement, or return on investment, or more secure custom, or better service, or whatever). When we are dealing with each other in a local community, therefore, we are creating a common good together, on the basis of which we can each gain some

individual benefit too (which usually includes some financial reward, but is not limited to that). Wherever people are acting or working or cooperating together, they are producing common goods, and all these shared goods, in a wonderfully varied and articulated way, build up into the wider common good of societies as a whole (see Chapter1).

It is helpful to look at what we produce when we work towards shared objectives in three ways. Firstly, as we have been saying, we can recognise that shared goods, created between us as we try to achieve an objective together, create the basis for distributing the individual goods that we all need. A reasonable level of literacy, created through the shared good of education, allows a community to be able to create more business activity, and thereby more wealth that can then be distributed to individuals. We participate in the good of education. A 'participated' good like this is interesting because it can be shared with others without anyone losing by that sharing, and, indeed, the more people are educated, the more we all benefit from that. In the case of education, we can have 'gatekeepers' who can control access to education, but we can also find ways of sharing knowledge that circumvent the gatekeeper, as, for instance, various uses of the Internet have demonstrated. Participated goods create the framework within which each one of us can benefit individually, that is, each of us can receive goods that can only be shared by allocation (like a pie can only be shared by cutting it up and giving a piece to all those around the table). If we are members of a business and we all work hard together, towards our shared purpose, we will create products and services that serve society and an economic return as a result of that—our pie—which can then be allocated to all of us individually (the basis of the allocation also needs to be a participated good—a sense of fairness or justice—if it is not to create tension and to damage our motivation to work together for our common good). Businesses can only be successful within societies that are flourishing; local communities can flourish within regions and nations to which they are contributing, in whose good they participate, and from which they draw benefit.

Secondly, we can recognise that achieving any shared goal requires what we can call 'foundational goods'—which lay the foundations for a good life and which include things like enough economic wealth, infrastructure and capital equipment, policies, norms and legal

systems—and 'excellent' goods, which are what constitute the good life itself, or what we could call human development in community, or a deeper and wider set of capabilities (see Chapter 2). Without enough foundational goods, our life together is threatened, just as weak foundations threaten the house which is built upon them. But spending all our time on creating foundational goods and not on what the foundational goods are for—the 'house' made up of excellent goods—leads us to a lack of fulfilment and unhappiness. Doing this as a community is like the avaricious man who only lives to make more money. We can see the problem with this relatively clearly on the individual level, but our Enlightenment mindset tells us that we should focus only on foundational goods at a community level, and this limits our capacity to imagine what a good life in community could be like.

If ideas are the driving force of history and allow us to imagine our future, very basic ideas such as these can provide a mindset that could undergird, gradually, a new way of thinking about development. These mindsets act slowly over time; we could say that the Enlightenment mindset gradually had its influence over the last 300 years. Perhaps the most emblematic example of how a basic mindset can change the way we think about things is that of the Benedictine monks and their attitude to manual labour. As we know, classical civilisation thought of manual work as only for slaves, but over hundreds of years, the positive view of work to be found in the Rule of St Benedict gradually had its impact, allowing many later developments and much economic growth. If we can get some simple ideas right and clear, they can be of fundamental importance for development prospects.

If we were to adopt a mindset like this one in regard to development, we would start to expand our development focus. For instance, the relational aspects of development would be much more important to us. We would be interested in the goods held in relationships, alongside the individual goods with which we are more familiar (the latter being what Blueprint would call 'foundational' and 'allocated' goods). The IPBC project already demonstrates this kind of mindset change by focusing on the nexus of goods, their integration, the density and quality of relationships, and the coherence of normative elements within the nexus (see Chapters 1 and 2). We could imagine a post-2030 Development Agenda in which goals are developed in a relational way,

with indicators and measures like the IPBC's nexus to track them. The more this mindset with its recognition of the fundamental importance of our relational dimension for our wellbeing, can drive our imagination, the more we will see it driving our history, that is, the way we develop.

We would also begin to be able to talk about shared final goals, held in the relationships between us, but which also allow for individual human freedom to express itself in the realisation of these goals. Both will be needed to allow different communities and cultures to develop in a way that is meaningful and shared, as well as in a way that recognises individual and historical diversity. The IPBC metric captures this (see Chapter 3), too, by, on the one hand, measuring certain key variables while, at the same time, allowing a partial re-ordering of priorities among the normative dimensions (as an expression of local agency and local knowledge).

We said that there are three ways of looking at the common good. The third and last way brings us back to the story of selling dreams. For if we are promoting the common good, we need to ask ourselves: is the good that we are working towards really good, or is it just apparently good? This is the most difficult question for us to ask ourselves, not least because it goes against one of the basic elements of the Enlightenment mindset that we have been talking about (it makes us discuss our final goals, rather than leaving everyone open to decide that for themselves). 'Selling a dream' isn't bad, but is it really good? The idea of something being 'apparently good' is useful here, since it recognises that we are all trying to do something good—the marketers 'selling the dream' are trying to do that for their customers—but do they actually end up doing that? We could say, for instance, that this type of advertising plays on the kind of vulnerabilities that women often have—of feeling bad about their self-image—and thereby it ends up perpetuating this vulnerability, even if the women themselves want to buy these products. Is that good? The answer in a case like this is not clear—but we can all see that there is a question here that is worth exploring. Maybe we will end up still selling dreams, but the dream we sell could be a better one, one that does not thrive on the weaknesses of our customers.[10] In other words,

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10   We can see something like this in the 'Campaign for Real Beauty' promoted by the Dove brand of beauty products, owned by Unilever, see https://www.dove.com/uk/stories/campaigns.html.

we could start to move our activities from the arena of apparent good to true good. The relevance for development should be obvious. We need to ask ourselves the question: is what we are doing really for our human, social, and ecological good? We need to listen to many voices and to hear their answers, and allow ourselves to be inspired by great artistic and religious voices too. We can also come to learn over time that something we once thought was good turns out not to be so. No one who was behind the carbon-based industrial revolution set out to threaten the very ecosystem that supports life itself, but we can now see that this will result from our industrial production system unless we change it. So, we cannot always know in advance if what we are doing is only an apparent rather than a real good, but if we had always been asking ourselves: 'is what we are doing truly good?', we might have started to realise the problem and to change earlier, instead of facing a crisis of truly existential proportions as we do now.

Development is about life, and needs practical action. A discussion of our fundamental mindset may seem a luxury in the face of the critical social and systemic problems we need to resolve. Nevertheless, witnesses like Ian Goldin and the Benedictine monks tell us that foundational ideas really change practical outcomes. Let us close with words from John Maynard Keynes on this point: 'The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is run by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist [...] It is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil' (Keynes 1953, p. 306).

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