



The Nexus between Personhood and Development

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Abstract. The link between the concept of personhood and development has become contentious in philosophical discourse. The non-connectivists' perspective on the link is that personhood as a concept is too metaphysical to appropriately address social issues like development. However, there are two major and opposing positions, the western liberal view and African communitarian view, which constitute the connectivists' perspective establishing the nexus between personhood and development. Each of the connectivists' perspectives explains personhood and its attendant values from different cultural standpoints. The values of the human person hence contribute immensely to whatever kind of development that comes to a people. Using the method of analysis, we argued that while appreciating the relevance of cross-cultural values to development, the peculiarities of the values of the culture of a people emanating from their views of the human person are foundational to the successes of any development programme or policies. We therefore concluded that the values of the human person are fundamental in development and as such, there should not be any form of suppression or imposition of values alien to a people so that development activities can become more participatory.

Keywords: Personhood, Development, Communitarianism, African Cultural Values, Connectivists' Perspective

1. Introduction

The concept of personhood is found within the framework of discussions in the realms of ethics, social and political philosophy, metaphysics and

other sub-areas of philosophy. In these areas, discourses on personhood are narrowed down to communitarian perspective, descriptive or metaphysical perspective, moral perspective and phenomenological perspective, to mention but a few. All of these perspectives on personhood are what scholars have generally been discussing respectively as normative and ontological aspects of the person.

The two broad perspectives which are constituted by different aspects of personhood are indicative of the multidimensionality of the concept (of personhood). However, we must clearly state that most of the literature that discuss personhood as a concept are involved in piecemeal discussions on the concept; whether from the two broad perspectives (ontological/metaphysical and normative/social) or the perspectives from the sub-areas under the two broad perspectives. In spite of this fact, there are numerous attendant values of personhood which establish the normative aspects of the human person and explain the relevance of such values to development.

Development on its own has been so commonly used to the point where we have failed to cognize our elementary knowledge between growth and development in economics. In development as well, there is also, perhaps, a deliberate conflation of economic development with human development from the development theories, programmes and policies from the First world countries exported to both developing and underdeveloped countries of the world. This brand of development called economic development seems to be universalized to mean development itself as a reflection of the economic and individualist idea of the human person as

advanced by western liberalist view. Development was meant to bring about policies and strategies that would address the many perplexing problems bedevilling the so-called Third world countries, especially by certain world powers and organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations, etc. Most of these bodies were to address the economic woes the entire world was thrown into at the end of the Second World War. This is why Rapley thinks that “all (these bodies) were designed to create as stable and freely flowing international trading environment as possible” (1996, p.5).

From the brief look at development, we can rightly opine that it is a concept that makes meaning when it is all about the human person (Rapley, 1996). It is therefore important for the nature of the human person who is the ultimate recipient of development policies to be known so that the rightful kinds of policies and programmes can be effectively sustained by the people as there is a very high propensity for them to participate more in policies that reflect their existential orientations. This is the view we referred to as connectivists’ perspectives which dispels those who find it difficult to decipher how a metaphysical issue like personhood should constitute discussions on social issues such as development. These pessimists are described as non-connectivists whose position does not constitute any complexity in this work; hence they are only highlighted for intellectual consumption and clarity.

2. Perspectives on Personhood

There are two major divides as far as discussions on personhood are concerned, namely the western liberal view which gives primacy to individuals over the community; and the communitarian view which places the community over and above any isolated individuals in human existence. In what follows, we shall examine both views, somewhat, in details.

2.1 Western Liberal View of the Human Person

This libertarian view is also called the ontological view of the human person whose descriptive understanding of human nature places priority on the individual over the community. Ontologically, all human beings are persons with certain descriptive attributes or features, whether such features are in potentiality or actuality. On the basis of this, the intrinsic quality of personhood begins at conception and it is present throughout life (Mathuna, 1976). Such individuals are not potential or “becoming” persons; they are persons by their very nature. Within

this framework for understanding personhood, there is therefore no such thing as a potential person or a human non-person. This is affirmed by Beckwith thus: “it does not make sense to say that a human person comes into existence when human function arises, but it does make sense to say that a fully human person is an entity who has the natural inherent capacity to give rise to human function” (2001, p. 109). This individualist nature of person portends completeness and independence. He does not need social relations with others to become a person. Another scholar’s view that has been classed as ontological is Descartes’ metaphysical conception of personhood which is also seen as psychological by virtue of the singularity of self-consciousness as the defining feature of the person. The emphasis on autonomy of the person as cardinal in the ontological perspective is exposed in Descartes’ position that man, as a person, has a guarantee of being himself, of effectively existing, of not being a pure dream, but an authentic reality, because he thinks himself: *cogito ergo sum* (Yeitch, 1960). The ‘I’ consists in self-consciousness; this personhood is determined by this indubitable criterion of self-consciousness and cannot be negated even by the most powerful and insidious demon.

Key concepts that define individualist view of the human person which are also fundamental in development include independence, autonomy, freedom and responsibility among others.

2.2 Communitarian Perspective on Personhood

This perspective to personhood is a discussion on the nature of person as social and it is generally referred to as the normative aspect of the human person whose emphasis is on sociality and not the autonomy and independence of individualism. Looking at person from this point of view seems to be reactive against individualism; not because, in terms of existence chronologically, individualism is prior to communitarianism but the latter itself has been found to be relevant in responding to the (Western) attempt at universalizing individualism as the nature of the human person. This anti-Western understanding of person mainly finds its expression in Africa and hence African communalism has been viewed as the compass for communitarianism.

It is the community that determines who a person is, not only because of the complex person-preparatory processes an individual goes through but more importantly because of the moral framework of the ‘otherness’ which an individual must stick to if s/he wants to both acquire personhood and remain a

person. Satisfying the rigours of the transition to personhood depicts that an individual has acquired personhood while the 'eternal' conformity to the intrinsic values of the transition process constitutes achievements that fundamentally contribute to being a person beyond ordinary humanness. This is the picture captured by Menkiti in his use of the concepts of acquisition and achievements (2004) and Masolo's idea of acquisition and participation (2010).

The communitarian perspective of person therefore prioritizes concepts such as solidarity, common good, reciprocity and mutuality, covenant and consensus as part of what significantly defines "the process a human being must go through in order to achieve personhood in a communitarian context..." (Ballen, 2015, p. 8).

3. Dimensions of Development

The concept of development cannot be satisfactorily discussed without looking at the etymological perspective to it. We make this submission because in it lies almost every interpretation of the different senses of development. In its etymology, the word development comes from a French verb, *veloper* which means to wrap (Njoku, 2004). Another word that makes this seeming simple definition much clearer is unfold, which speaks of development as removing deficiencies for the purpose of improving the quality of a thing or making it more mature. This clearly implies that every development is goal-driven, mainly aimed at moving from one level to another; a lesser level to a greater and better one. Development here is seen as qualitative and could be defined in the view of Njoku as "qualitative increase, an improvement in quality or a process of maturation or advancement in qualities" (2004, p. 3).

The interest in this kind of definition of development is human and not simply economic with the human person in isolation, hence we talk of human development, which is qualitative as against quantitative development. The quantitative aspect of development deals with growth in economy and as such, a country is said to be developed when certain economic indices improve from a lower stage to a higher stage. Claude Ake says such an improvement is merely an economic growth and should not be equated with development despite the fact that economic growth itself can lead to development (1996).

From the foregoing, talking about development means that both its qualitative and quantitative aspects are relevant if it has to be realized in the lives of people. Putting these two perspectives into

consideration, we can define development as a process of improving on the ontological/spiritual and the social/material aspects of human existence. One very important concept here is 'process', meaning that development is a continuous phenomenon and has no termination point. Considering the need for seeing development as a process and the unity between the social/material aspects and the ontological/spiritual aspects, its essence must represent the entire gamut of change by which an entire social system tunes to the diverse needs and desires of individual and social groups within that system, moves away from the conditions of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory and towards the situation or condition of life regarded as materially and spiritually better (Nyanasi, 2010). In terms of the economic perspective of development here, a society may move towards satisfying the basic needs of her citizens but that takes care of only the social/material aspects of development. But for development to be more holistic, there is need for it to create a "sense of worth and self-respect (i.e. self-esteem) and freedom from servitude, that is, emancipation from alienating material conditions of life, ignorance and dogmatic belief" (Nyanasi, 2010, p. 34). In view of all these, development programmes should be driven by some ethical values so as to take care of the spiritual aspects of our existence which cannot be taken care of in the social, economic and technological aspects of development.

A closer look at the discussion thus far shows that there are various dimensions of development but this work groups those different shades of development into two, namely: structural/material development and human/spiritual development (Unegbe, 2002).

3.1 Structural / Material Development

This is the economic brand of development that appeals to many individuals. When physical and material structures appreciate or increase in a given locality, such a locality is said to be developed or developing, as the case may be. One important feature that characterizes this kind of development in its advancement is industrialization. On its own, industrialization means "an increase in the share of the gross domestic product (GDP) contributed by the manufacturing sector. It is a process that involves a change in structure, or make-up, of the economy" (Chandra, 1992, p. 4). Industrialisation, continues Chandra, is further seen as:

greater economic specialization in production geared to national and international markets and a significant increase in the share of manufacturing in the total output of a country and in the absorption of

resources. It also implies the use of science and technology in production, leading to the production of goods based on complex technology and capital-intensive techniques; changes in work organization leading to scientific management and increased productivity; the spread of industrial techniques to the rest of the economy; a shift in attitudes and relationships to material phenomena; and a shift to urban settlement (1996, pp.4-5).

The key features of this brand of development are represented in this passage as thought out by development theorists to include comparative advantage in the production of goods as advanced by Adam Smith, production for national and international consumption, advancement in the manufacturing sector, capital investment, science, advancement in technology, material consciousness as against spiritual(superstitious) consciousness, etc. All these indices are determinants of the development of any given society and whenever they occur in every aspect of our lives, then we are said to be developed.

When productivity increases on the basis of science and technology as individuals embrace material phenomena, we can be referring to structural or material development. Again, the more complex a society's technological organization becomes, the more we ascribe development to such a society. The technological advancement of a society makes room for high productivity. And the propensity at which a society produces should have preponderance over how it should consume in order to be seen as developed. A producing society in this sense can be classed as developed while a consuming one is seen as underdeveloped or developing, depending on the degrees of consumption.

A society that makes advances in such areas as explained above and in which social institutions and relations are well organized for optimum output is a developed society. For instance, any developed nation should be able to, from observed indices, make predictions about its economic future, whether there would be an improvement or a downturn. This is in line with how the physical environment and its attendant challenges are tackled, using the laws of natural sciences.

2.2 Human / Spiritual Development

This aspect of development is necessitated by the criticisms that trailed development which focused on economics at the detriment of the human agents behind economics itself. The proponents of this brand

of development are of the opinion that the economy is simply a means to achieving development but ultimately, the end of development is the human person. A major proponent of this position is Amartya Sen (a consultant in the preparation of the *Human Development Report of 1990*) whose 'capability approach' to development was a relevant consideration in the United Nations Development Programme's (U.N.D.P's) reconceptualisation of development. On this reconsideration of development, human beings- as it ought to be- became the major focus of development. Historically, this approach to development which began in the late 1980s following the criticisms of the economic approach was formally documented into what is known as the *Human Development Report* in 1990, with a fundamental focus on *Human Development Index* (HDI) as the common denominator for any activity that passes for development (1990). This report was very unequivocal in its aim of ensuring that economic benefits translate to human well being as captured in the foreword written by William Draper who was the UNDP administrator at the time. In his words,

The purpose of development is to offer people more options. One of their options is access to income - not as an end in itself but as a means to acquiring human well being. But there are other options as well, including long life, knowledge, political freedom, personal security, community participation and guaranteed human rights. People cannot be reduced to a single dimension as economic creatures. What makes them and the study of the development process fascinating is the entire spectrum through which human capabilities are expanded and utilized (1990, p. iii).

Development which is confined to the matrix of economic growth is not adequate any more in the issues of development. Human well being is therefore seen as the primary goal of any development agenda and this is measured with certain indicators that culminate in what the UNDP terms the HDI as mentioned above. The constituent indicators of the HDI in that report include but not limited to: life expectancy, literacy and standard of living (1990). All these and more are indicative of the fact of human development which is summarily defined as the process of "enlarging people's choices" (1990). The choices available for human development to take place are encapsulated in human freedom within the arena of politics, culture, economy and interpersonal relations among others.

Our position here is that the United Nations' definition of human development is not to be viewed

merely as a social concept but to be seen from, more importantly, its philosophical foundation in Aristotle and other classical philosophers whose views we are not able to discuss here as they are not a focus of this research. What we are left to engage ourselves in now is what we take as our working definition of human development given its multifarious conceptions from a lot of scholars from different fields.

As we attempted to summarise in the preceding paragraph, development itself is not just a social concept, especially when discussed in connection with human well being. More than that, we see it from the ethical point of view because it means nothing, as many scholars agree, without the involvement of persons. Human development therefore can be seen as the intangible aspect of development whose activities are geared towards improving the quality of lives of persons and the relations they have with one another by reducing social inequity thereby promoting certain socio-ethical principles such as freedom, justice, human dignity, integrity, cooperation, reciprocity, responsibility, common good and other related principles.

4. Personhood and Development: Any Connection?

The question of the connection between personhood and development began from the assumed distinction between person and personhood, a distinction that is purely metaphysical which we hold in this work as more apparent than real. This apparent distinction is the foundation of the view which we refer to as ‘non-connectivism’ in this essay. In this distinction, personhood is seen as an abstraction from person; the former being the features that make an individual a person while the latter are the physical and moral individuals that can be identified in space and time. By virtue of the fact of the existential description of person within space and time, we can access such entity by our five sense organs and it therefore makes more sense to link person with development which is also in itself very visible if it takes place in both the environment and person’s life. On the other hand, personhood has a description that is wholly immaterial and only a thought-existent without any material identification with such concepts like communalism, individualism, rationality, thought, morality, reflection, freedom, autonomy, responsibility and many other related non-tangible concepts. As such, it is physically inaccessible and has no connection with developmental activities,

programmes, policies and strategies that can both be physically accessible and assessable.

The orientation of the ‘non-connectivists’ is majorly informed by two different brands of metaphysics; namely Kantian metaphysics and the problem of universals. Kant’s distinction between the *noumena* and the *phenomena* becomes a basis for severing personhood with development. While the former is outside the categories of the mind and cannot be accessed in the physical world and remains unknowable within the realms of our senses, the former can be so accessed because it is within our existential world. Personhood is therefore ‘noumenic’ while development is ‘phenomenic’; and they are consequently two separate and parallel concepts. Roscelin’s nominalism also completely supports the non-connectivists’ approach to the link between personhood and development. Personhood as a universal concept refers to nothing as it is only a word comprising letters and nothing else. At best, “words are created by people, perhaps for certain purposes, and within certain historical contexts. Creation speaks to the intuition that words exist only through the action of an agent” (Miller, 2020). Such words as personhood are considered to be illusory. One cannot therefore build something on nothing by attempting to connect development with personhood.

The connectivists’ view takes a frontal attack on the non-connectivists’ approach of using the apparent distinction between personhood and person as a yardstick for separating personhood from development. It is an intellectual self-deceit to create a gulf between person and the features that make an individual a person and then erroneously apply the principle of physicalism to determine which of the two qualifies to be linked to development as if there is a ‘real distinction’ between the two (person and personhood). One wonders how a table can be so called without its ‘tableness’ which comprises its hard surface and its standing on all four. The physical person that the non-connectivists prefer to link with development is not an empty box of an individual; he is called person by virtue of being a holder of personhood just like a table has its name as a result of its possession of ‘tableness’. So, our oscillation from person to personhood and vice-versa is deliberate in this work because of the inseparability of one from the other.

In line with the connectivists’ perspective on the relationship between personhood and development, we opine in this work that there can be no development in the real sense without the involvement and employment of the features of

person in development activities, programmes, strategies and policies. In other words, without personhood, there would not be any meaningful development. Development becomes person-centred because of the relevance of the principle of individualism or communalism. The individualist principle of personhood is also seen as the libertarian perspective of conceiving the human person. The human person conceived in such a manner is supposed to be the driver of any development programme or policies, with government only providing the enabling environment for the markets to thrive. What matters both to the individual and government is that the individual should develop both himself and the society through economic principles like liberalization, privatization and deregulation (Olufemi, 2006). Liberalization depicts free access to economic enterprises without any official control from government; privatization is the process whereby government sells off its public owned property and utilities to private individuals and gives them the rights to ownership without undue interference in the manner economic activities are carried out afterwards; and deregulation as the name explicitly signifies means without interference, freedom of economic operations and which is devoid of restrictions from government. The person-centred development here applies certain values like freedom, autonomy, competition and rationality among others in order to prove the relationship between person and development.

Competition, individuation, dislocation of status and custom, impersonality and moral anonymity were hailed by the rationalist because these were the forces that would be most instrumental in emancipating man from the dead hand of the past and because through them the naturally stable and rational individual would be given an environment in which he could develop illimitably his inherent potentialities. Man was the primary and solid fact; relationships were purely derivative. All that was necessary was a scene cleared of the debris of the past (Nisbert, 1962, p. 4).

Another feature that majorly defines person and connects with development is communalism in which personhood is strictly communitarian. Here, development policies should reflect the culture and values of the people who are recipients of such policies; the values and cultures being the definition of personhood. Personal development is therefore untenable without group or community development. In economic relations, this concept of personhood allows the community to regulate the activities of the individuals whose primary goal is that of profit maximization, which becomes part of him overtime

by his involvements in activities that promote individualism, liberalism and capitalism. Communalism and its intrinsic promotion of community priority over individualism are capable of generating development devoid of the spirit of competition and intolerance which ultimately breed insecurity in the individualist connection with development. Nisbert succinctly captures the situation better as he opines that:

The family, religious association, and local community...cannot be regarded as the external products of man's thought and behavior; they are essentially prior to the individual and are the indispensable supports of belief and conduct. Release man from the contexts of community and you get not freedom and rights but intolerable aloneness and subjection to demonic fears and passions (1962, p. 25).

The development that is valued by the people is that which is based on the communitarian culture of the people and their corresponding communitarian conception of personhood. Outside of this, connection between development and the human person is a hoax. The meaningful and significant values here that further deepen the link between personhood and development here include solidarity, social dependence, tolerance, community ownership of property, consensus, mutuality, reciprocity among others.

5. Conclusion

There are two basic perspectives that define personhood, namely individualism and communitarianism as we discussed in this essay. These perspectives are products of two different and seemingly opposing cultures, both on personhood and development; Western liberal culture and African communalism. Policies of development across the globe are dependent on the perspective of the place of the human person in development activities as understood by the cultures. While the Western liberal individualist culture allows the individual and the market forces to drive policies and programmes of development, the African communitarian and collectivist culture places premium on the group and community for development policies to be participatory and more impactful on the people.

It is not the focus of this essay to delve into the debate of which of the two perspectives is more appropriate for development to be more meaningful and pursued with human face, resulting in actual human development. The goal of this essay is rather to show that the connectivists are right to identify the

link between development and the respective cultures of individualism and communitarianism on personhood. Josiah Cobbah, quoting Nobles, captures the relevance personhood cultures to development when he avows that:

The worldview, normative assumptions, and referential framework upon which the paradigm is based, must...be consistent with the culture and cultural substance of the people. When the paradigm is inconsistent with the cultural definition of the phenomena, the people who use it to assess and/or evaluate that phenomena become essentially conceptually incarcerated (1987, p. 327).

Having established the fundamentality of personhood to development, we now conclude this work by stating very clearly that the central thesis of this work is that development policies would not be alien to people whose values of the human person are held to be primary to the planning and implementation of such policies. Conversely, policies of development are bound to fail significantly where the values of the understanding of the human person are imposed on a people who have a markedly different view of personhood with equally correspondingly varying values of development.

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