
Lexicon And Syntax of Development Cooperation

Need for Global Cooperation in Health Care Services : Lessons Learnt from the Present Pandemic



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“We overlooked the fact that nature operates as a unique complex system where infinite numbers of natural processes are intricately linked.”

Nature is a great leveller. It is proved time and again when a natural disaster strikes. A flood or a forest fire or a cyclone or an earthquake is clear example of how nature does not discriminate not only between human beings but also between human and other living beings. Floods and fire in forests have revealed umpteen times as to how man and other wild animals cohabited for survival for days long. Remember Noah’s Arch.

However, competition is the credo of the living world when nature remains placid and does not vent her fury on anyone. Survival of the fittest becomes the normal rule of the game and inter-specie rivalry, coupled with intra-specie competition, becomes the order of the day for survival. Such competitive attitude is fuelled by specie level perspectives of scarcity in resources. The predators prevail over their prey in competition but nature ensures that the vanquished ones multiply at a much faster rate to sustain their existence. Obviously, there are instances of symbiotic relations among some particular species. They are exceptions.

The significant difference between human beings and the rest of the living kingdom lies in

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the fact that while the latter follow the natural laws in letter and spirit, Homo sapiens have learnt to follow a path that entails “control over nature” as a means for sustenance. The means for livelihood made available by nature appear too little to satiate human wants. We have been able to replicate many natural processes applying our deep understanding of the laws of nature – physical as well as biological. Our confidence in being capable of replicating the rest of natural processes, that are still beyond our comprehension, by tomorrow, if not today, itself has made us to believe that we are ready to rein in nature as per our will.

We have developed mechanisms to add gravity defying capabilities in our movements. Medical science has helped us improve life expectancy beyond what the nature would permit in her heydays. We can seed clouds to bring rains to perched lands even when nature is not obligating. We build irrigation canals to divert natural flows of water to far flung areas. We have developed technologies to extract the solar energy that remained trapped in fossils for millions of years. Nuclear capabilities we developed are strong enough to destroy the globe along with nature many times over. Natural forests were felled to be replaced, often by silvicultural plantation, and converted to other possible land use practices.

These made us not only complacent but also place our complete confidence on competition as the fundamental moving force to drive societal progress. The control over nature decides our power to control the rest of the living kingdom, including those among the human beings, who unfortunately lag behind in their capacities to control nature. We call them less developed. We divide humanity into two distinct groups. On the one hand, we have the group with capabilities to control and there are the rest, on the other, who look forward to receive support from the former in improving their control on nature and be ready to be controlled – willingly or forcibly – in return. Thus comes the legitimacy of competition and its

Understanding Nature in Bits And Pieces

Unfortunately, our quest for control over nature happened in bits and pieces. We overlooked the fact that nature operates as a unique complex system where infinite numbers of natural processes are intricately linked. We failed often to understand or even appreciate this interdependence across the different natural processes and used our knowledge of natural laws in a sense as if these processes can be initiated independent of one another. Construction of irrigation canals has been found to have disturbed the

natural flow of water, resulting in devastating floods. Indiscriminate felling of forests is claimed to have contributed to the threat of climate change and even spread of zoonotic viruses into the human domain. The spread of Ebola, SARS, MERS and the present pandemic linked to Novel Corona Virus is attributed to virus strains jumping from animals and finding human bodies as safe hosts to replicate. Construction of extensive network of roads in the Himalayan region is often cited as reasons for recurrent landslides. Bridges over rivers are alleged to contribute to extensive siltation, while dams restrict movement of aquatic species to their natural spawning habitats.

From Comparative Advantage to Competitive Advantage: Increasing Inequality

Increased control over nature instilled confidence in human being to usher in a competitive regime. Nation states came up to strengthen the space for competition with each nation state emerging as the unit of operation. The national borders, created artificially, even bifurcating a natural landscape that was undisturbed for years, became the new normal. And we derived our identities from our passports and immediately lost our specie level primary identity of being a member of Homo sapiens family. We devised mechanisms to define global wellbeing as an aggregate

of national state of wellbeing with competition among nations being efficient and effective in improving the level of national welfare. The notion of ensuring intra-nation competition also set in gradually to make competition the elixir for achieving a higher quality of life the famous argument by David Ricardo professing the virtue of comparative advantage for global gain was turned upside down in favour of competitive advantage. Comparative advantage argued for two-way exchange of goods between countries based on their relative capabilities. Even if a country is capable of producing both the commodities with a competitive edge, it is preferable in the interest of increased global welfare that a country specialises in the product in which it is relatively more efficient and procures from the commodity from the other country the product in which it is relatively less efficient. This argument may well be surmised as a statement favouring cooperation between two countries. The present day emphasis on competitive advantage to guide global exchange completely ignores the spirit of cooperation espoused by Ricardo.

The arguments in favour of competitive advantage created a sharp global divide. Those who developed the competitive edge formed the powerful group, while those who lost out formed the residual group. Further, the gap between those lying at the top of the income

ladder and those at the bottom in most of the countries increased consistently. Make no mistake, the competitive advantages have largely resulted from our thorough and utter disregard of complexities in the natural system that would impinge on the sustenance of man-nature relationship of interdependence.

Man-Nature Interdependence: Sustaining The Crucial Balance

The COVID-19 pandemic struck right at this juncture when we started talking about inclusive development that would leave no one behind and launched efforts to reach the sustainable development goals (SDGs) within a stipulated time frame. This is also a vantage point in the history of mankind when the concerns about possible threats to humanity arising out of global warming and climate change are being raised repeatedly and consistently. Both these concerns call for maintaining the delicate balance between man-nature relationship that emphasises the existence of human beings as a part of nature and not as her controller. This calls for greater cooperation among all of us as Homo sapiens, transcending the borders of our national identity. The narrow national interests we pursued in the spirit of competition have to be shunned considerably to ensure our sustenance as a specie.

What can be a better example than the global havoc caused by

COVID- 19 virus. With the number of people globally infected touching almost 30 million when the number of countries yet to be affected can be counted by the fingers, and more than 206 thousand persons succumbing to the attack, it is no longer difficult to realise the necessity of a shift from a competition-led model of global welfare to a cooperation-led one. Without any debate, it may be convincingly argued that the most important domain that calls for immediate global cooperation is related to provision of health services. This pandemic has shown clearly that the morbidity and mortality profile of an individual is not independent of that of others. A virus, unfortunately, does not respect the national borders as it spreads. The strictest possible immigration laws cannot stop it entering the geographic space of any country, howsoever globally powerful through completion it has emerged to be.

In Favour of Global Cooperation In Health Care Services

The easiest way to begin global cooperation in right earnest is in health care services, specifically those linked to infectious diseases. Emergence of a new infectious disease throws challenges that are often without any known solution to begin with. Quite obviously, the interdependence between nature and the new virus cannot be overemphasised. The challenge

lies in deciphering some of these interlinkages. And we require a global effort in place.

Health services can be divided into two domains – curative and preventive. Diagnostic services bridge these two bridges. In case of a new disease, not much is known about the new pathogen. What are its biological and molecular characteristics? How does it enter a living body and how does it replicate itself inside the body of the host? How can its capacity to replicate be controlled? What pharmacological principles may be applied to prevent mortality of a patient who has been infected? What supportive medical services are to be delivered to the patients? All these questions are to be answered simultaneously to reduce the risks of mortality. In order to be effective in providing such curative services to those infected at the earliest, a concerted effort by the experts all across the globe – in a cooperative spirit and shunning the standard competitive approach – is of primary interest.

Preventive measures are applied at two stages. Firstly, it involves measures to prevent spread of infection of the disease. Standard public health related protocols have been well designed through experiences of several such bouts of infectious diseases in the past. Some tweaking here and there to bring in the specific symptomatic characteristics of the disease can

be developed without much loss of time. The second measure is linked to development of a vaccine that can serve the role of a prophylactic which, if administered, would bolster the immunity of the individual to attacks by the pathogen and thereby prevent further spread of the disease.

Joint collaborative efforts at global level can be through a network of R&D organisations with funding from public and philanthropic sources, that would not be interested in claiming intellectual property rights on their research outputs is perhaps the best solution to these issues. Members of such a network should also be engaged in continuous communication to identify future threats of new pathogens emerging and possible remedial measures that would help arrest recurrence of another pandemic. Such knowledge and the services created out of them would be deemed as a global public good, beyond the scope of generating ant private profit. The same principles should be applied in case of development of diagnostic kits.

As the present pandemic set in, we realised that the prevailing health infrastructure available to provide hospitalisation and associated curative services is grossly inadequate, not just in the poorer countries but also in many of the high income countries as well. We cannot afford to be caught off guard again, if such a pandemic recurs in

the future. A large dose of investment in global health infrastructure is a necessary imperative. To reiterate, given the low expected rate of return, as pandemics do not happen frequently, the investments will not be forthcoming from sources that are interested in immediate return. Public investments, including sovereign and possibly, pension funds will have to invest heavily in such an initiative.

A pandemic resulting out of the spread of an altogether unknown pathogen, throws up another big challenge. In our quest for actions to minimise loss of lives, the livelihood security of millions has been set aside. Imposition of strict lockdown and “social distancing measures” has led to loss in jobs for many. Economic activities have come to a near complete halt with a huge negative impact on the present production levels. Uncertainties prevail about the time these economies would require to limp back to normalcy. Even doubts persist, if we are heading to a new normal. The cost of treatment, often availed of in private facilities, on the face of lack of adequate public healthcare support also has been substantial. A large section of the global community, under such an uncertain situation, would look for some income support to tide over the

present distress and uncertainties in the future. Curiously enough, such demands for income support would not just be forthcoming from some select countries. It is going to be a pan-global necessity. A global basic income support fund to be of use in the event of future pandemic is the need of the hour. The resources may be used in case of other natural disasters as well. Each country may be obligated to contribute to this fund which will grow through judicious investments during normal years and will be used only during global exigencies. Regional groupings of countries may also set up additional support funds to be used during health related crisis at regional levels. The annual accretions to the fund may be used for meeting some of the urgent needs towards achievement of SDG 3 related to health.

The institutional mechanisms needed to facilitate the implementation of these proposals may be worked out amicably if a consensus is achieved. It is, however, beyond doubt that none of the existing mechanisms of international cooperation – multilateral or bilateral – are in a position to take up these tasks. We require an altogether different set of working principles and institutional mechanisms to operationalise the proposals.