

■ CYPRUS

An opportunity for a “social shift”



The National Strategic Plan for 2011-2015 challenges the current status quo in development trends. Its two primary areas of focus are education and partnerships between public institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs). Thus local CSOs will become more active in the international development arena and the country has the potential to become a pioneer in social development. For this to happen, Cyprus must lead the way in the shift in development trends away from market-centred policies towards social justice, human rights and equality.

CARDET

Sotiris Themistokleous
Charalambos Vrasidas
Michalinos Zembylas

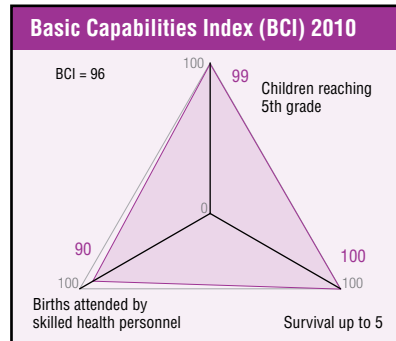
The gradual transformation of the world into a “global village” under the hegemonic imposition of a common socioeconomic system has spread the effects of the financial crisis to almost every corner of the globe. Central to the current debate on overcoming the crisis is the notion of “development” and the dire position of the so-called “developing countries.” Since the 1980s, many aid-receiving countries have been trapped in the prescriptions of neoliberal international institutions and exploited through their debts and loans. In order to secure Official Development Aid (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) from national and international institutions, they have been forced to apply “free” market and trade policies that would allow easy access to local resources by the funding agencies. Such practices, however, minimize social and public provisions and weaken the social safety net.

Resetting priorities

On many occasions developed countries promote their methods and practices as universal prescriptions of modernity and progress. However, development cannot be exported or imposed uniformly in different social, economic and geographical settings. After the late systemic shortfalls in the economy it is becoming obvious that the focus must be on developing functional local civil institutions. These should be from the public sphere and civil society and promote full democratic participation of all citizens in transparent decision-making processes. For instance, the development of aid-receiving countries’ educational systems – addressing local needs and focusing on the local social context – should be one of the main pillars of development.

Local civic institutions may not completely replace the socioeconomic and cultural imperialism imposed in recent decades on the Global South,¹ but they have the potential to provide the political resources to disrupt hegemonic policies and practices. In this context, it becomes a necessity to revisit the dominant trends in development and reset the priorities of aid-providing states.

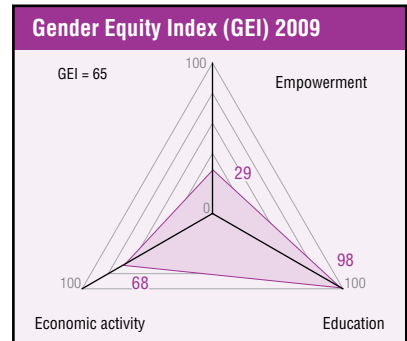
¹ See R. Keily, *Empire in the Age of Globalisation: US Hegemony and Neoliberal Disorder* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005).



Cyprus is in the process of drafting its National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development for the period 2011-2015. Taking into consideration the historic conjunction that EU and the world face, this offers the opportunity for the country to become a pioneer in alternative development policies and practices. The Plan could be directed towards the development of viable societies, governed by democracy and social justice rather than markets and industrial exploitation zones. It is well understood that Cyprus has limited power to influence the broader international trends in development. However, as a state active in EU decision-making and a provider of ODA, it could provide a leading paradigm for the development strategies of other small states.

First, Cyprus has to design, implement and evaluate its own successful model of policies and practices for development. The island has passed all the stages that most developing countries are currently facing: colonial rule, the struggle for independence, internal conflicts, external invasion and refugees. In this historical course, the empowerment of society through the provision of free access to public goods and services for those who suffer has been central to the path to recovery.

At the core of the island’s development process has also been the close cooperation among all private and public social stakeholders. Cyprus’ successful developmental experiences based on social protection and partnerships should be reflected in the Government’s policies and particularly in the Strategic Plan. Consequently, any approach towards “development” in the current national debate must have as a priority the empowerment of efficient and effective civic institutions through the democratic participation of all citizens.



Breaking away from the neoliberal recipe

In the past few years Cyprus has promoted initiatives that diverge from the dominant international neoliberal development model while aiming to raise its ODA. The mid-term strategic plan of 2006-2010 set as a target the disconnection of ODA from business-oriented infrastructure and support. Also, as part of its obligations as a new member state of the EU, the country set an ODA goal of reaching 0.17% of gross national income (GNI), something that was achieved in 2008.² Additionally, the mid-term strategic plan has designated the development of social services, education, public infrastructure projects and the environment as target areas.³

These policies indicate a social orientation towards development. Social services in receiving countries are focused mostly on issues of health care, human resources development and equal access to services and tourism (the last of which reflects the main sectors of the Cyprus economy). Undoubtedly the aforementioned focal areas have some important elements of social justice; however there is a lot more that can be done. The focus on social services, for example, must be oriented towards the development of agencies that will secure the just distribution of public goods and services and promote human rights for all (not only selected individuals).

² Environment Service, *Debate on the National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development 2011–2015*. Available from: <www.moa.gov.cy/moa/agriculture.nsf/environment_gr/environment_gr?OpenDocument> [in Greek] (accessed 20 February 2010).

³ Environment Service, *National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development 2006–2010*. Available from: <www.moa.gov.cy/moa/agriculture.nsf/environment_gr/environment_gr?OpenDocument> [in Greek] (accessed 20 February 2010).

Another aspect that should be revisited in the new National Strategic Plan is the area of education. In the 2006-2010 Plan, education-oriented aid focused on scholarships and supporting access to international educational institutions.⁴ The opportunity in the new Plan is to revisit that approach and promote the development of a functional local educational system in the countries to which Cyprus provides aid, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Mali, Palestine, Somalia and Yemen.

As the current debate for the new Plan rightly emphasizes, Cyprus has long-standing experience in the provision of public education along with a private education sector that has rapidly developed in recent years. This accumulated experience and the technical capacity gained must be disseminated in other developing countries through relevant provisions in the new Plan.

Cyprus considers the new Strategic Plan to be a continuation of the policies of the period 2006-2010. In relation to ODA the goal is to reach 0.33% of GNI by 2015, almost doubling the current level of 0.17%. The Plan focuses on the empowerment of local communities and the development of representative social institutions in the public sphere and within civil society. This will reduce conflicts and tensions, especially in neighbouring regions, that otherwise may have a spill over effect on Cyprus either through extensive migration or through the reduction of trade and economic cooperation.

The new National Strategic Plan has particular provisions for "Education for All". The development of education will be based on three pillars: the introduction of sustainable development in the educational and social context; the development of a democratic educational environment where teachers and

students will be agents of change for a sustainable and just society; and the provision of training to deal with unsustainable practices at all levels of social life. The new Plan considers formal public education to be among the successful causes of development in Cyprus. Additionally, it prioritizes social inclusion, democratic procedures and a just society as the leading attributes with regard to education.

Nevertheless, those attributes are only provided for the local context and are not reflected in the international development priorities. Cyprus' attempt to re-orient its domestic educational system should be reflected in its approach to international development policies and in the provisions for the future ODA framework as well as its distribution, in contrast to past practices. At the same time, the Government must attempt to influence its counterparts in the EU to follow those initiatives domestically and internationally as an efficient measure for protecting the EU itself from conflicts, tensions and massive migration flows.

The role of civil society

After years of lobbying and debates, the Government is considering for the first time collaboration with local CSOs in its overall development policy, a recognition of CSOs' long-standing expertise and experiences in development. In addition, the Government has expressed its commitment to collaborate with them in delivering the national ODA. The New Strategic Plan sets as one of the national priorities the "development of partnerships between the public sector and civil society". Prior to this provision ODA was mainly directed towards international organizations and agencies of other states. The introduction of local civil society in national development policies

constitutes great progress for both the country in general and the local CSOs in particular. The Government should also open up public dialogue and invite civil society to provide suggestions and have a more active role in drafting policies, something that has not happened in drafting the New Strategic Plan.

Civil society is a key player in development and an effective medium for the provision of aid and services and the promotion of human rights. International civil society and CSOs can become agents of solidarity and social justice.⁵ Cypriot CSOs have direct involvement and experiences in the fields of reconciliation and social justice, along with the capacity to provide training and education. They can contribute substantially to the healthy and just distribution of ODA to people in need.

The National Strategic Plan 2011-2015 offers a sense of hope through initiatives that challenge the current status quo in development trends nationally and internationally. The two primary areas of focus, which are expected to prove the most influential with regard to processes of reform and progress, are: (a) education and (b) partnerships between public institutions and CSOs. Any progress in those areas will benefit tremendously from taking into consideration issues of social justice, inclusion, democracy and full civic participation. With the comprehensive shift of the new Strategic Plan towards policies focused on social development and with local CSOs becoming active in the international development arena, Cyprus has the potential to become a pioneer for other small states in this area. This can only happen if the island chooses to lead the way for a shift in development trends away from market-centred policies towards social justice, human rights and equality. ■

4 *Ibid.*

5 Reinhart Köstle and Henning Melber, "International civil society and the challenge for global solidarity," *Development Dialogues*, October 2007. Available from: <www.dhf.uu.se/pdfiler/DD2007_49_civ_soc/development_dialogue_49_art_2.pdf>.