To rethink freedom: Freedom of development.

By: Fernando David Márquez Duarte, University of California, Riverside, PhD in Political Science

The debate of what is development and how to achieve it has been present in the last few decades, currently the international measure of development that is more accepted is the human development index. I consider that this measure and other attempts to rethink development aren't adequate to different societies and different realities and have been imposed from “developed” to “developing” countries. In this essay I will discuss the most relevant conceptions of development that have been used or proposed and analyze them to propose an alternative way of thinking development, using the ideas of nahuas cosmovision, reaching a more inclusive conception of development that is more adequate to non-western realities, specifically developing countries that have a colonial past, such as the countries in Latin America.

Development was initially considered a synonym of economic growth, using the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the indicator of development. This generated economic reductionism in the analysis of the concept (Boisier, 2004). In response to this biased conception, Seers, who was one of the first economists to oppose this limited conception of development, argued that there were three minimum conditions to cover in order to achieve development: nourishment (which depends on the income level), employment and equality (Boisier, 2004).

Considering development only in macroeconomic terms is extremely limited because it doesn't explain what individuals do with their income, and doesn't actually show the income of each individual. Seers’ conception was a step in the right path, however and it didn't consider important indicators that are considered valuable for individuals, such as education level, health, inclusion in public decisions, the environment, and others. It focused solely on economic terms.

Currently, one of the most used conception of development internationally is “human development”. This is defined as the set of opportunities that each individual requires to achieve the wellbeing that they consider valuable (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2016). Operatively (with the Human Development Index) this approach to development considers three dimensions: income, health and education. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) adopted this conception to measure development internationally, and I must say that...
it is, by now, the most complete international measurement of development, however it does have its flaws.

The three dimensions included in this conception of development are necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of wellbeing; however, they are not sufficient. This idea of development and wellbeing was posed by Amartya Sen. For Sen (1993), each individual decides its own path to the development they want to pursue in order to achieve a well-being level that they consider adequate. Thus, it is impossible to talk about individuals choosing their own path to development if we don’t talk about democracy and participation in public decisions. The lack of a dimension that concerns with democracy and participation in public decisions make the human development index incomplete, and inherently contradicting with the theoretical proposal of Sen.

A different approach is the “democratic development”, which refers to the process of constitution of politically active citizens and to the amplification of participation in public issues (Rivas, 1996). Moreover, participatory instruments are considered essential to achieve this kind of development, as well as democratic consolidation (Dagnino, Rivera, & Panfichi, 2006). This approach can be used to complement the human development index, because it includes what the index lacks.

Regarding this issue, Galtung (1971) argued that democracy can be seen as the condition for exercising effective control over periphery. For me, liberal democracy is the condition for global elites to control the underdeveloped, because average citizens are not the ones included in the decision-making process directly; the representatives are, which are vastly composed by the economic and political elite, especially in developing countries. A more inclusive democratic system would be a participatory democracy (Barber, 2003; Pateman, 1970), in which the citizens participate directly in public decisions, by instruments such as referendum, plebiscite, citizen polls, citizen assemblies, etc. With all these conceptions of development analyzed, the crucial question appears: What conception of development can be more inclusive for the developing world, for the marginalized societies and groups within these societies?

Most of the conceptions analyzed concern mainly with economic aspects, even conceptions like human development, have income as a central part of development, thus, following a western, and to some extent, colonialist conception of development, imposed from the “developed world” to the “developing world” or “third world”.

To challenge these conceptions of development is worth discussing the nahuas philosophy and ideas. The nahuas are the bigger indigenous group in México. Nahuas are extended through 12 states in México and are approximately 1.5 million of individuals (Museo Nacional de Antropología, n.d.). This indigenous group was known as mexicas or aztecas, before the Conquista (the invasion of an important part of Latin America (mostly Mesoamérica) by the kingdom of Spain), and were the dominant civilization in Mesoamérica by the time of the invasion.

The thoughts of nahuas that I’m going to discuss are the ideas related to pantheism, sacrifice and free will. Their cosmovision (term that I use because it is more complete than “world view”, is about the connection of all living organisms, including humans, with not only nature, but also the cosmos as a whole) gave them an idea of what is the essence and goal of human life that differs importantly with western views.

The first idea to discuss is pantheism. Pantheism is the idea that reality and divinity are the same thing, the divine is engrained in all things in existence: in daily life, in nature, in the cosmos (León Portilla, 2006). A clear indicator of pantheism in nahuas is the conception of their creator god Ometéotl; the source of all life. They believed that Ometéotl sustains the nature and the cosmos, that he is connected with
everyone and everything, this idea for nahuas was named *i-tlatamanca.*

I interpret this idea of pantheism as a different approach to life and development. Instead of looking for a higher income, a more complex technology or more acquisition power, nahuas were deeply concerned with preserving nature and having a collective sense of development. Since in their cosmovision everything is connected, and their gods are part of every living being, the purpose of life for them would be to coexist with all living beings respectfully, without an inherent desire to dominate or oppress others. This thought is also suggested by Ometéotl's essence, Ometéotl's consciousness level is different from the lesser gods, that's why Ometéotl is the highest divine form (León Portilla, 2006). Ometéotl, understands that everything is connected in cosmos, that is part of the other and is constantly changing so it makes no sense to harm the elements and/or humans. This idea is related with the arguments that profiting at the expense of natural resources and exploitation is oppressive and obviously unsustainable, it doesn't make any sense to destroy nature; it would be self-destruction, because everyone and everything is connected, i.e. destroying the Amazonian jungle would be like cutting our own legs.

The second idea of nahuas is sacrifice. This idea wasn't considered only for humans; also their gods sacrifice in their cosmovision. *Quetzalcóatl,* which is one of their most important gods (one of the children of Ometéotl), being the god of wind and knowledge, sacrificed himself to give life to humans, in the 5th. Era/sun. He had to go the underworld to steal the bones needed to bring humans to life (León Portilla, 2006).

The idea of sacrifice is so ingrained in their cosmovision that it is present since birth. When a baby was born in their culture the midwife gave a speech to the baby, which said that by cutting the primal link with the mother (umbilical cord), an offering was made which states that the baby came to the world to suffer, to persevere. The baby came to the world to flourish, to grow, to provide and to work to bring dignity and worth to the family (De Sahagún, 1829).

The idea of sacrifice supports the collective view of world and existence in nahuas. I interpret that their belief of sacrifice for the survival of their community and civilization speaks of a non-selfish essence of human life, thus, it contests the idea of competition and desire to dominate others that is inherent to capitalism and to liberal democracy. I consider that development from the nahuas perspective, is not about profiting or having more economic gains than others, is about preserving collective life and sacrificing individualist impulses for the good of the community.

The last idea that I'm going to discuss from nahuas is their free-will. Following the preaching of *Tonalámatl* (which was a kind of oracle), humans have free choice and can change their destiny. Nahuas conceived the opportunity to change their destiny by personal control, result of a self-consciousness determination (León Portilla, 2006). This idea challenges the conventional conceptions of development, which are imposed from a top-bottom perspective, which denies the agency of individuals on achieving their own development.

This idea of having the capability of changing their personal destiny is related to critical theory's idea of emancipation, where by developing a critical consciousness, individuals can rebel against the oppression they suffer and advance to emancipate into freedom to develop in a non-oppressive and more inclusive path (Freire, 1970; Price & Reus-Smit, 1998; Santos, 2011).

Critical theory is committed to build an understanding of the world, (especially the marginalized world, the ignored world, the so called “underdeveloped world”, “third world” or “developing world”) that promotes emancipatory change, in the political, economic and social spheres (Jones, 1995).
However, for Boaventura de Sousa (2011), critical theory from the global south takes a more anti-colonialist and non-western approach, he argues that the goal of this approach is to produce and validate knowledge clustered in the resistance experiences of all social groups that have been systematically oppressed by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchies mainly.

To emancipate is an action of liberating from oppression, thus, changing the oppressing structure in order to be free to achieve development and wellbeing, but not a development as western theories consider; is to achieve the development that each individual regards as valuable for well-being. Having an alternative, non-western and more inclusive conception of development, incorporating the conceptions of indigenous groups such as collectivity, solidarity, but also free-will (Quijano, 1993) could be the key to let societies reach the wellbeing that they decide is adequate for them. The ancestral knowledge that indigenous groups, such as nahuas, produced and lived by can give us valuable lessons and make us think of alternative ways to reach a more inclusive world with more social justice (González Casanova, 2006).

Summarizing the arguments I presented, western thought of development revolves heavily around the economic dimension (income, profiting, economic domination), but nahuas present an alternative way of thinking development. Their cosmovision regarding the ideas of pantheism, sacrifice and free will shed light on a conception of development that doesn’t revolve around an economic dimension, but rather in a collective existence idea, where the survival and wellbeing of each individual is linked with the preservation of all life in the world. In this conception, issues like environmental and social sustainability, achieving equality (not only economically but also socially) and democratic development (linked with the idea of free choice) would be more central to development as a whole.

With the nahuas cosmovision ideas I propose to rethink development, to have a real freedom of development, to have an alternative way of achieving it, not imposed by the “developed world”. I specifically propose an alternative path to development, from the global south, considering five dimensions: health, environment, economics, education and political decision. The environment and political decision dimensions (with a participatory democracy approach) that aren’t considered in the conventional development conceptions ensure an alternative path to development, not centered in income or a dominant economic conception, but in a more inclusive and emancipatory path to development. However, it’s worth noting that my proposal to conceive development is just one of many alternative ways that can be taken to achieve development, and following a critical theory stance, it shouldn’t be applied generically to different societies. Rather, it should be modified and adapted in the terms that each society decides that is better to achieve their own idea of development, and thus, to reach their desired wellbeing.

These five dimensions are equally important to achieve wellbeing, so they should be considered equally to measure development, and thus, to formulate laws, public policies and social programs to achieve development.
References