

The Reflective Practitioner by Ashok Khosla

Excellence and relevance
Information overload and information underuse

The Reflective Practitioner: Building With Hands, Mind And Heart

At no time in history has there been a need for radical change as great as that of today. Fully one third of the people on this planet barely surviving or subsisting on the margins of the monetised economy. At the same time, the soil, water and biological resources that provide the basic supports to all life on the planet are rapidly degrading or disappearing.

And each year the gap between the needs of the people and the capacity of the earth to meet these needs widens.

Who is to blame? And who can help bring about the change we need?

Well, in one sense, the answer to both questions is ... everybody. But some have greater responsibility than others, both for where we are and for bringing about the changes that can take us where we must go.

It is the "professional" to whom we must turn as one of the prime causes and the carriers of the solutions to many of our social, environmental and economic ills. It is the professional in whom society – at considerable expense -- has invested its resources and hopes. And it is the professional whom it has charged with the responsibility of delivering results in its wider interest.

And, unfortunately, it is the professional who has often let down, and sometimes betrayed, the expectations of society.

In some cases, this has been because of lack of *information* on the specific, contextual issues to which the professional has been asked to respond. In other cases, it has resulted from lack of *knowledge* or "science" regarding the processes and systems that need to be designed. And much of the time, it has been the result of a lack of *wisdom* – in turn partly because of narrow perspectives engendered by specialised training and partly because of varying degrees of greed and graft.

Information Overload and Information Underuse

Lack of information can no longer be much of an excuse. Over the past decade, the extraordinary revolution in information technology has overtaken almost all the professions – not only scientists, doctors, lawyers and others, but equally those working in the fields of building and construction to whom this issue of the newsletter is addressed.

Published and unpublished information is now available to anyone who wishes to access it on virtually any subject through not only the printed literature, but increasingly through the electronic media, including computer-based data exchange. If there is one true revolution of the twentieth century, it is the mass access to the internet that is now spreading to even the poorest countries. Although this access may still take time to reach the poorest of the poor, few professionals working on their behalf need to be left out of it. The danger is no longer too little information, but too much.

Information overload now seriously threatens our ability to make rational — i.e., well-informed, meaningful — decisions. As the quantity of information coming at us rises, and these days it rises exponentially, the general background noise is inexorably swamping out the signals we need to pick up to design a more sustainable future.

It is not the information technology revolution that is the cause of this overload. It is, rather, the common and widespread desire to publish and broadcast everything one knows, no matter how trivial or irrelevant it might be to others. But the new information technologies are unquestionably helping to accelerate the process.

Today's word processors, modelling programmes, MIDI synthesizers and computerised palettes with millions of colours certainly open opportunities for self-expression in a variety of ways to the average person that were never dreamt of before by any but the most wealthy or the most talented. Yet, the number of truly outstanding products generated in a given period of time probably remains the same as it always did. Indeed, in genuine creativity, at least outside science, today's output from six billion people may well be less than that of many other periods, such as those of Athens twenty five hundred years ago (with a few hundred thousand) or of England a couple of hundred years back (with a few million).

Access to all this information has, also, never been greater. New printing technologies, photocopying machines, global postal systems, telephone and fax services, internet and the worldwide web all serve to connect more and more people to each other and to the growing number of information sources. This is all to the good, since only a better informed citizenry that can help society choose paths of development that are genuinely in their interest and truly sustainable.

But in this jungle of computer chips, telephone wires and printed paper, it is going to be more and more difficult to find the Leonardos, Shakespeares, Mozarts, Newtons and the Mahatma Gandhis of today. Without their insights and influence, it is difficult to see how societal choices can make the quantum jumps in understanding needed to improve the lot of present as well as future generations. Fortunately, history shows that at least some of the truly great ones survive to create and communicate in spite of all the barriers society places before them.

But much progress in the arts, humanities, science and technology can also be made by the cumulative effort of ordinary mortals not endowed with the insights of such geniuses. And today, more than ever, such progress needs team work that brings workers from different fields together to create something new. The high level of connectivity and information exchange made possible by the new technologies is the first major signal of hope for bringing back a more holistic view of the world, lost for the past two hundred years of Cartesian science.

The work of Development Alternatives has always aimed at discovering development paths that work, for the poor as much as for the rich, for nature as well as for future generations. It has been a fundamental part of our effort to learn from others and

actively to share the information we generate, driven not so much by generosity as by self-interest. After all, with love, information is one of the few things in the world that is negentropic: the more you give, the more you get. All else in the universe, as shown by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, is running down.

DAINET, our information network designed to improve exchange of information and knowledge on issues of sustainable development is now increasingly used by practitioners and researchers working in such areas as regional planning, rural technology and transparency in governance. Designed on the basis of careful studies of how users actually search for and acquire information, DAINET has already been able rapidly to build up a strong network of partners.

Knowledge: Seeing the Trees and the Forest

Critics of modern science often, and rightly, level their guns on the reductionism embodied in its methods of inquiry. Breaking nature down into its atoms might well lead to new insights, but what is the use of such insights if they take us further and further away from the realities of everyday life? Digging ever deeper into the mines of analysis does not guarantee a path to the synthesis we need to understand the intricate and often inviolable links that connect nature, people and machines.

If the reductionism of science appears to be taking scientists down a dead end, the reductionism of development theory and practice is even worse. It seems to be leading us directly into a black hole. Vast amounts of money and other valuable resources are daily sucked into unproductive investments to satisfy the whims of self-appointed experts and decision-makers who believe they have found “the key” that will solve the problems of poverty - or of the environment, or of whatever they have identified as worthy of their attention.

The key is usually stated in terms of the form “If only there was a light bulb [or a toilet or a solar cooker or whatever is the specialty of the pontificator] , , , , ”, or “I have always maintained that the solution to the country’s poverty is literacy [or whatever] . . . “. The parliament votes thousands of crores in guilt money to be thrown (unfortunately not with very good aim) at “poverty alleviation” by legislating schemes on housing, water, creation of work (not long term employment opportunities), etc. NGOs and thinktanks are often no better, bringing their preconceptions to the design of the single intervention they feel, perhaps because it is the only one they know, that will make a lasting difference.

It is the community based organisations who work with real life people, whether in the village or in the city slums, that come to know the complexity of the lives of the poor, and the futility of the misplaced trust in monodimensional solutions. And from such experiences we must learn quickly. The main key, if there is one, is to build the capacity of communities to identify, formulate and solve their own problems. For this, they must have institutional mechanisms that allow solid participation by every citizen in local decision making. And, to make such participation meaningful, they must have access to information on a variety of things, including their rights, their resources and the technologies they can use to set up their livelihoods on a sustainable basis.

Given the scale of the problems to be tackled, any solution must be replicable, at least in communities with similar conditions. Outside intervention is meaningful if it serves not only to create a living example of how the processes of sustainable development can be set in motion in a particular case, but also to catalyse local initiatives to adopt these processes on a larger scale. Programmes to “adopt a

village” are usually of greater benefit to the adopter than to the adoptees. Unless the processes of development are appropriated by the community where they are demonstrated and by neighbouring communities who in time accept them as their own, the development approaches being promoted cannot be very sustainable.

TARAGram in Orchha is the flagship of a programme of Development Alternatives to establish a nationwide network of living technology villages. These TARAGrams will provide a wide array of opportunities to local people for sustainable livelihoods within the campus plus the training, information, technology, financial and marketing support facilities for other communities in the area to enable them to generate their own livelihood options for themselves.

While taking full advantage of the social and economic benefits of development for himself and his class of people, he has given very little thought to the needs of other classes or groups of people. It is my feeling that this is a short-sighted view, likely at best to be self-defeating and at ^ worst suicidal. Why should the professional subscribe to the values of sustainable development? Ultimately, the answer to this question lies in the values held by society, and in how well its educational and reward systems help the professional incorporate these values into his own sphere of work.

As shown by three centuries of western science, a reward system administered by the pressure of peers is perhaps the most effective way to ensure quality and integrity, without hurting creativity. But even the scientist has not been totally successful in internalising societal values into his enterprise. What both the scientific and other professional communities now have to develop are value systems, enforced if possible by their internal mechanisms, to ensure that their work does not undermine the objectives of the wider society within which they operate but rather reinforces them.

4What is now needed is to turn from greed and graft back to creed and craft for renewing the pledge that a professional makes to society when graduating from training into professional practice. Even though the Hippocratic Oath may no longer mean to medical doctors what it once used to mean, it represents the kind of commitment each professional has to make for the conduct of his or her work. The lawyer, the doctor, the engineer, the architect, the civil servant or any other professional will have to recognise that fulfilment of the narrow goals set by purely personal or even professional consideration is not enough to satisfy real social needs. On the contrary, it is a formula guaranteed to lead to sub optimal and often dangerous results.

The Hippocratic Oath addresses itself primarily to the question of integrity and, to a lesser extent, of excellence. It requires the professional to carry out his or her duties at the highest level of that individual's ability. It does not, however, address the equally important questions of relevance, which is determined by the broader context within which the professional's work is carried out. What is now needed, therefore, is an extended professional commitment that covers the need for all these elements - integrity, excellence and relevance.

4To set in place a well designed professional system will require a high degree of vigilance by peers - individuals and organisations - to ensure that development professionals bring to their work the highest possible level of integrity, excellence and relevance. For this effort, the role of the Independent Sector that includes not only

the voluntary organisations and NGOs of today but also new kinds of organisations of tomorrow, capable of combining public goals with private motivation, becomes doubly important.