Reimagining development: An idea exchange

*Project led by the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA) – Sri Lanka*

**Abstract**

Recognizing the limiting structures of the current development paradigm, CEPA convened a multidisciplinary symposium aimed at sharing ideas for a new concept of development. The symposium featured a series of panel discussions and presentations on topics such as ecology, the feminist critique, ethics in development, and knowledge hierarchies in the development process. Other TTI-funded think tanks participated in the event. A paper documenting the ideas and themes emerging from the symposium was subsequently published.

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**On the Matching Funds**

In 2011 the Think Tank Initiative established the Matching Funds program as another source of financial support. These funds support efforts by TTI-funded think tanks to achieve their long-term objectives, and also promote peer learning and collaboration.
**COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS**

CEPA organized the Reimagining Development symposium. Several other organizations were invited to participate, including the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the Center for the Study of Economies in Africa (CSEA), the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), and the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA).

**WHAT THEY DID AND WHY**

With the help of TTI Matching Funds, CEPA organized its 11th Annual Symposium on Poverty entitled “Reimagining Development? An Ideas Exchange.” The symposium’s overarching goal was to question and challenge the “tried and true” formula of neoliberal growth and the dominant paradigm of development. CEPA believes that such an intellectual query about the core of the current paradigm is much needed, especially in the face of global issues such as the recent economic crisis, persisting trade and financial imbalances between the Global North and South, and the physical limits of planetary resources. Such questions are especially important in the context of post-war Sri Lanka, as local interests continue to negotiate ideas around development, politics and the best way forward.

The event aimed to bring together like-minded people and provide momentum to the discourse on alternative development paths and goals. While this event came broadly under the tradition of CEPA’s Annual Symposia on Poverty, it strived to look at poverty not as a self-contained and isolated category but as a by-product of the broader discourse of development. The 2011 event, structured as an ideas exchange, focused on the theme of reimagining development and intended to provide a forum to share thinking as well as stimulate new ideas about what the goal of development is or ought to be, and how best to pursue it. CEPA succeeded in gathering a diverse group of economists, policymakers, artists, and thinkers and facilitated a cross-fertilization of ideas, aimed at bringing development beyond the current narrow confines of neoliberal economics.

This critical assessment of current development paradigms and the evaluation of core ideas about development took place in seven parallel sessions, each discussing development in relation to a particular area in our political, economic, and social realms: wellbeing, ethics and values, art, women, urban development, the environment, and knowledge hierarchies. Each parallel session was a unique thought experiment in which attendees came together to reflect upon the unresolved tension between material progress on the one hand, and human wellbeing on the other. Each session had an average of four panellists, each offering different perspectives on the session’s topic. After the presentations, audience members were encouraged to clarify, challenge and comment on the panellist presentations.

**RESULTS**

The symposium was very well attended by 150 people, doubling the expected number of participants. The interactive nature of the sessions helped maintain the enthusiasm of participants, who were very engaged and posed numerous questions to the panelists. However, the broad nature of the topics covered by each session at times generated an unmanageable number and range of comments, questions and concerns from the audience. The symposium seemed to have triggered deep responses; participants were either recalibrating the existing notion of development or vehemently defended the current paradigm of growth. While some of the participants’ questions were discussed during the seven parallel sessions, many other important ideas could not be addressed due to time constraints. The high level attendance and the passion of participants were a testament to the symposium’s timeliness and the urgent need to continue this conversation, which has only just begun.

As the objective was to generate new ideas as well as help coalesce existing ideas into coherent and relevant forms, CEPA drafted a publication highlighting the main ideas that were raised at the symposium. In order to
generate a critical mass of writing and dissemination on the idea of “development” and alternative visions of progress in Sri Lanka, CEPA started a Monday newspaper column entitled “The Monday Morning Question.” Several researchers from organizations that participated in the symposium have already begun making contributions to the column. The articles that are published in the Monday column have also been taken up by a widely-read online news portal – The Colombo Telegraph – who has committed to re-publishing the content on the Monday Morning Question. As a way of taking the discourse to the Sinhala-speaking audiences in Sri Lanka, CEPA also started a column – “Thaara Paara” (literal translation: “the tarred road”) in a popular newspaper – Ravaya. The column has been well-received by readers and Ravaya is keen to collaborate with CEPA to develop the idea of “re-imagining development” among Sinhala-language newspaper readers in the future. Finally, CEPA also re-designed the “Reimagining Development” website, transforming it into a discussion forum on innovative ways of integrating economic, social, and environmental progress in our communities: http://reimagining.cepa.lk/index.php/en/

NEXT STEPS

Going forward, CEPA’s Reimagining Development intends to fuel and direct the Southern Voice Initiative. TTI and others can play a key role in assisting CEPA achieve this goal in a number of ways by:

- Promoting the Reimagining Development website;
- Linking Reimagining Development initiative with similar discourses that are taking place among TTI grantees and non-grantee networks;
- Supporting the development of networks that champion reimagining development;
- Supporting strong empirical research in the area of alternative thought on growth, development and wellbeing.

CEPA is aware that Reimagining Development involves breaking new ground, which invariably brings with it a set of risks. The core of the initiative involves changing minds and consciousness about development and growth so that we, as a society, can move towards a more balanced and responsible model of prosperity. As common knowledge suggests, changing minds is difficult, time consuming, and much more arduous than reinforcing the status quo. Though the journey ahead is bound to be difficult, CEPA strongly feels that Reimagining Development is an idea that is worth taking forward and is strongly committed to doing so.