

At Last – A General Theory of Development

Nelson N. Foote's *Sharing the Earth*

REVIEWED BY STEWART E. PERRY

With this review I am privileged to introduce the readers of *Making Waves* to the most important book yet produced on the subject of development at both the community and national levels. Fortunately, it is also well-written and non-academic (no footnotes!) – a compelling account, studded with insights and comments that will delight.

But be forewarned. This work is comprehensive. You will need to devote plenty of time in order to follow the author all the way along his careful, clear, and detailed pursuit of a meticulous argument. I myself found it best to plough ahead on each chapter, recognizing that reiteration in later chapters will bring a fuller realization of the picture as a whole.

There is no index, so you may find it troublesome to try to revisit something. Also, the very first chapter is much too detailed and may put you off. You might skip a bit. Don't let it stop you.

That's it for the caveats.

Foote emphasizes that what he presents is "a" general theory of development, not "the" general theory of development. While that is indeed true, *Sharing the Earth* actually offers some immediate operational pointers for the CED practitioner. "There is nothing so practical as a good theory," one social scientist once wrote, and Foote's work confirms it. However, don't read this book because it is for practitioners. Read it because it provides that broad context, hitherto unavailable, for understanding the place and meaning of CED in today's world. Of course, other writers over the years have spelled out their theories of development, but none have made their ideas so relevant to the community level, where in fact development has to take place.

The author has the comprehensive background that his undertaking would require. He was a farm town boy who studied agriculture at Cornell University and then, as an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, surveyed farmers' attitudes toward government programs. Next he worked for some years as a labour union trainer and journalist with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. He completed a doctorate in sociology at Cornell and taught family studies at the University of Chicago. Hired away by General Electric, he spent some years researching consumer behaviour and community development. (Presumably GE

and over the years acted as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as to other corporate clients. He maintained his interest in the Caribbean and other island nations, and in Trinidad's evolution, including a social enterprise called Servol, a model youth development and training program, run by the youth themselves. Upon retirement, Foote began in earnest the harvest of thought and experience that is *Sharing the Earth*.

Now let me try to reduce to a few paragraphs a rich work that is comparable in heft to a conventional book of 6-700 pages. (Don't look for it in your bookstore. It is

"The foreign firm typically views the nation [read 'community'] it negotiates with as brought to terms by persuasion, bargaining, bribery or force, not by reciprocal teaching [which would enhance human capacities on all sides]." (Sharing the Earth, p. 109)

was interested in developing new communities because they would sell appliances for the housing!)

At one point he was sent off to Trinidad where a potential contract for a massive GE turbine generator was linked to the possibility of a new community. This off-and-on 2-year stint proved pivotal. Foote was struck by the contradictions and limitations of multinational corporate industrialization as an effective mode of development for poor nations (read "poor communities"). He witnessed many opportunities for self-directed development, some unrealized, some aborted, and others wisely and effectively taken in hand. Soon after the Trinidad assignment, however, he left GE to return to academia

only available as a single-space, 335-page manuscript in portable document format on-line at www.sharingtheearth.net. And it's free – a thoroughly modern way to diffuse a very far-sighted analysis.)

Foote's assignment in Trinidad taught him the dead-ends to which the usual strategies of development (import-substitution, commodity-exporting, and re-exporting) lead. This and the experience of many other countries, more and less developed than Trinidad, all led him to conclude that development actually takes place in six distinct contexts or *theaters*, as he calls them: the demographic, economic, cultural, educational, political, and familial. Each theater has a lead institution, class of industry, professions, kinds of poverty, and

“Whenever the relentless search for lower costs takes labour as the target, ... even the rich [may begin to] recognize that direction as pointing to not mutual development but mutual impoverishment.”
(*Sharing the Earth*, p. 111)

Résumé : Finalement, une théorie générale de développement

Le critique Stewart E. Perry veut que vous sachiez que le livre le plus important qu'un praticien.ne de DÉC pourrait lire est maintenant disponible gratuitement en ligne à www.sharingtheearth.net. *Sharing the Earth* est une analyse très facile à lire et très captivante du développement communautaire, remplie de nouveaux regards que l'auteur Nelson Foote a acquis dans le milieu universitaire, dans le monde des affaires Américain, et à l'étranger (surtout à Trinidad).

Sur la base de cette expérience, Foote propose que nous comprenions le développement en termes de six sphères : la démographie, l'économie, la culture, l'éducation, la politique et la famille. Chacun a une institution de tête, une classe d'industrie, des professions, des sortes de pauvreté et des symptômes d'échec. L'essence du développement réside dans la culture des capacités humaines dans les six sphères. Particulièrement important à cet égard sera la professionnalisation au cours des années à venir : la multiplication des opportunités d'emploi qui a lieu lorsque nous améliorons la valeur d'un produit ou service.

Il fut dit « qu'il n'y a rien d'aussi pratique qu'une bonne théorie ». Le travail de Foote, même si un index et un premier chapitre moins détaillé lui seraient utiles, confirme la sagesse de cette affirmation. ■

symptoms of failure, and many other key features, all of which provide handles for the development practitioner. And what happens in each theater influences what happens in the others.

In the demographic theater, for example, farms are the lead institution, extractive is the class of industry, poverty is made manifest in disease, and emigration of youth is often a symptom of failure. In the cultural theater, churches are the lead institution, industries are integrative, the prime profession is artistry, boredom is poverty, and the most obvious symptom of failure is racial/ethnic discord or confrontation.

This is no academic dissection of human experience. As you read, examples from your own experience with communities seeking development immediately come to mind. At a time when the economic is often considered the only theater of importance to development, Foote's use of the six theaters sensitizes one to the immense variety of opportunity in the components and targets of development.

It is true, he notes, that the United Nations Development Program has created a Human Development Index to supplement the merely economic indices. But Foote points out that this combination of life expectancy, income (GDP per capita), and literacy levels is made into a dubious average, obscures trends, and leads only to a ranking among nations. In the end it is only another means to advance one's income as the primary human aspiration rather than one's capacity.

His careful analysis of the significance of theaters of development is richly informative. However, the truly ground-breaking concept in his theory is that the essence of development lies in *the cultivation of human capacities* in all six theaters.

As Foote describes so convincingly, real development (in human capacities) is

currently stunted, diverted, and blocked by the governing perspective in so much of the world, market capitalism, especially in its garb of the multinational corporation (MNC). That perspective equates development with mere industrialization, progress with corporate growth. Communist nations adopt the same market perspective and offer no substitute.

What will presage a new and fruitful perspective on mutual development for rich and poor nations/communities is the recognition of the fallacies in the common concepts that underlie our current perspective: supply, market, employment, consumption, price, value, productivity, etc. I especially recommend his discussion of productivity (pp. 132-135). Of course, critiques of such concepts have been successfully presented many times elsewhere, but Foote places his discussion within the context of the need for development.

This book by no means downgrades economics as such. Foote simply extends the discussion. For example, if the balance of trade is an important issue, equally important is the recognition of what is being traded. In fact, it will be key to development, because we must expand what is traded far beyond today's commodities. Foote seeks to offer a different, more fruitful, and just perspective for development than does MNC capitalism. He uses what I consider and he seems to admit is a distracting term, "plot," to refer both to a conceptual framework and a motivational engine. His plot depends not on the pursuit of (unearned) income (as is the key motivation in market capitalism) but on the concerted cultivation of human capacities that opens up new and enlarged demands and supplies. (So he has a lot to say about youth and its importance in every theatre.)

Each chapter demonstrates how that perspective can reconstitute and promote development (and employment) via each of the theaters. For example, after defining "the essential predicament of every community as its need to export specialties, of sufficient esthetic worth and financial value to the rest of the world to balance what it needs to import from other communities," Foote illuminates opportunities in entertainment as a growth industry. Though data on that

growth are poor and unreliable, it is clear that entertainment absorbs a growing fraction of the household budget (in the U.S., for instance), and thus “it should rank as a prime candidate for specialty exporting.” That observation about entertainment leads him in turn to a reappraisal of unpaid recreation, an example of his enlightening and engaging description of the economic significance of the mundane in the other theaters:

“Although it adds nothing directly to the gross domestic product, ...[for] many consumers it is their main reason for being; their work is an evil necessary to doing what they enjoy during leisure. For many [others] it affords practice in acquiring skills, knowledge and teamwork they will apply in their vocations. As a stimulant to imagination, it nourishes the exploration and experimentation that generate advances in technology, artistry, and leadership. The volume of goods produced by voluntary leisure activities – gardening, craftsmanship, amateur works of art – takes the place of what would otherwise be purchased. Countless professionals began as amateurs, across the entire roster of occupations.” (p. 75)

He provides many illustrations for expanded options in trade, building on what communities do or can do but do not sufficiently recognize as valuable. (Within his discussion of the familial theater of development he even reviews marriage and sex, and makes provocative observations of their relevance to CED.) In the course of this he revisits the historical progression of industry from extractive to fabricative to service, and then extends the progression. He refines the service category from its initial form of integrative industries (such as transportation, government, and finance). This opens the progression to other services of special interest in development, not just IT but the house-keeping services so critical to tourism and thus to the balance of trade of many vulnerable nations. Tourism, of course, sells to foreign visitors the pleasures of the locale’s attractions and in that sense is clearly an export.

So how can even the MNCs and the rest of the world move toward a more

rewarding future? Essentially, by latching on to the next stage of industrial progression, *professionalization*: the multiplication of employment achieved by enhancing a product or service’s worth, requiring increasing varieties and levels of capacities, skills, qualities. The medical professions are an obvious example. This multiplication, though, does not occur when so-called professional services become merely another form of commodification, as we see all too often now even in medicine (chain hospitals, for example). Rather, professionalization genuinely arises out of the creation of *values* – not *value* – that consumers appreciate. The producers of services and products that add values, and

“Creativity never reaches a ceiling in technology – unless it be the glass ceiling [for] women in engineering schools.... when consulted [women] can imagine tasks ... to which [engineers] have been blinded by masculine bias.” (Sharing the Earth, p. 297)


thus engage in production of specialties, are people whose concern it is to meet, not the income needs of owners, but the needs of consumers. Thus, such producers become “professionals” in a career, not workers in a job. They will serve other “professionals” who are similarly employed and create a fruitful system of demand that leads to employment, rather than to lower labour costs.

He makes a case for the professionalization of most if not all occupations in the sense that the worker can tailor his effort to meet the specialized needs of self-selected consumers. In the course of this discussion Foote illuminates the choices, in the pursuit of development, between career and job (the former as a projection of increasing capacities, the latter a stationary status), artistry and technology (the latter inventiveness as a means of increasing productivity, with fewer jobs, while the other by inventiveness increases demand and jobs, even

spurring technological change), and community and corporation (the concern for linked destinies versus a concern for growth in unearned income).

In the economic theater, the task for lesser developed nations/communities is “to proliferate specialty exports that will be eagerly sought by consumers who learn of their superior worth[, and that] requires professionalization of their potential producer, both artistically and technically” (p. 138). This will depend upon development in the other theaters, each of which Foote examines with an eye to its developmental opportunities and some specific actions that can be taken.

Foote has a breath-taking claim to

make: “A program for action by a community that invests in cultivating the capacities of all its members can eliminate poverty in all the areas of development within a generation.” Yet he also warns that the choice of cultivating human capacities is not the ultimate achievement, but a *direction*. It is the direction in which CED practitioners need to look for a through-going re-orientation to successful long-term development. 

STEWART E. PERRY is a lifetime honorary member of the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNet) and a senior associate of the Centre for Community Enterprise. He helped start Canada’s first community development corporation, New Dawn Enterprises, and was CEO of the Community Economic Development Center in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia 1988-1993. He became personally acquainted with Nelson Foote at that time, when the latter made an outstanding contribution to a local conference on the problems of employment and development in small island communities. (Foote also recommended Stewart’s book *Communities on the Way* for publication by SUNY Press.) Contact Stewart at stewartp@igc.org.