



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

WORK MATTERS

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COLUMN

The Shortest Distance; The Mathematics of National Development

“The price of electricity is cheaper here than in most places, so it reasonable that prices should go up.”
“The price of gas is cheaper here than in most places, so the public could pay more.”
“We have to help rich people get richer because rich people help poor people.”

We must ask, what do these types of statements mean for our efforts at national development? Do we want to look more like some developed countries, even where women lose reproductive rights, and maternity leave is ‘iffy’. The last time I checked, trickle down economics never really trickles down, especially when, ignoring COVID-19, wages have been effectively frozen for a decade or more. Why not be like a small oil-producing state that moves heaven and earth to host a global sporting event, at the cost of the human rights of migrant labourers, or is that hitting a little too close to home? Do we want to remain a post-colonial creature riven by historical legacies of inequity and inefficiency? What exactly do we believe we should look like, and how do we get from here to there?

As a society our efforts at change seem to be guided by the most basic of directional concepts: *“The shortest distance between two points is a straight line”*.

This is the type of social cartography that has failed us thus far. Our change ideas are utilitarian and seductive in their simplicity, and are portrayed as universal truths. The changes espoused often appear both simple and obvious. They also tend to represent a peculiar morality as well, validating why ‘the haves’ have more than the ‘have not’s’, allowing us to assign blame to those who appear to refuse to walk straight lines. Simply put, too many of us are unprepared or unwilling to make the simple and obvious changes.

After all, the persistent rise in crime cannot be only attributed to a failure of leadership. Despite the 600 murdered, the real victim may be the individual who turning out to receive aid in a time of crisis which may be per-

ceived as greed, indicative of moral failing, thus the very thing that makes it impossible to follow the straight line.

Clearly the ‘obvious’ appears to elude the moral meanderers amongst us. Coal pots and bicycles; planning your commute to reach to the singular destination simultaneously with the rest of humanity; putting party before country; these elegant, straight-line logics simply cannot be comprehended by many. And so, we the working masses, appear to continually frustrate national development.

More questions than answers arise. But what if our basic directional model is wrong and the moral assumptions are equally incorrect? Are there actually straight lines between where we are and where we want to go? Is it possible that the people are not simply recalcitrant and meandering?

I want to suggest a new model of development. Notwithstanding ‘flat-earthers’, on a sphere that can only be curved with squiggly lines, understanding that moving by squiggly lines requires a different logic. Its a complex and difficult science requiring understanding, hard work and patience. To start with, one has to know the starting point. This means accepting that this point is not arbitrary, and its inequalities are not inevitable, natural, or explainable by reference to universal principles of hard work or sloth. A lot of meticulously crafted crap; genocide, discrimination, injustice, corruption and social neglect went into making this point. Let’s move beyond blaming victims and accepting responsibility and accountability instead.

Then you have to know your end point. This has to be something that represents a meaningful improvement over where we are now, not needing to be perfect. It may even have to be a moving target. I surmise that it ought to be what we want to be, and not necessarily what anybody else expects. Let’s embrace our creativity and avoid mindless mimicry.

Once those issues are interrogated, then we can start

moving forward with a few simple goals, like being able to earn a decent income, even for the performance of menial tasks. Perhaps as a people, we could try not eating ourselves into lifestyles diseases. What about caring enough about our fellow man who would willingly sacrifice in times of crisis, so that those with less could sacrifice less? How about less price gouging in the marketplace? I mean, exactly how much profit is enough? What about not discriminating on any basis at all? And how about caring enough about ourselves and each other that we all just do our jobs to the best of our ability?

Admittedly, this is radical mathematics. It requires leaders to serve with statesmanship and humility, that more of the wealthy be more invested in the people, and for so many of us to not use hardship as an excuse not to do the right thing. We have to believe in this concept, that everyone can get and should get there, perhaps slowly, probably painfully, and definitely meanderingly.

So as trite as it might sound, I propose that:
The "surest" distance between two points is actually "caring" and "believing."

Listen, the future is coming no matter what we do. I just pray that we find a creative, complex, responsible, just and inclusive way to face it, together as a people.

Ian Daniel,
Dean Labour Studies
CCLCS