

Learning, Unlearning, Defining, Redefining

The IDSP experience

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Modernity is an age of gadgets, where things are created and destroyed, not in years but in seconds, where stances change, but where social change itself is an unthinkable phenomenon. The world is divided into developed and underdeveloped, and people are valued not for what they produce but as commodities, where learning is merely schooling and where dissent is sophisticatedly controlled. The weapons of subjugation are clever, and information overload is persistent. The destinies of people are determined behind closed doors. The global development is need of the market and the market drives the lives of the people.

This article seeks to present a humble effort in a remote, largely unknown place of the world. This effort can be seen in the exuberance of a group of people that created the Institute for Development Studies and Practices (IDSP), a place where they can demystify the development practices, challenge the power structures, and work with communities to exhale a fresh breath of air, outside the poisonous, uni-cultural worldview.

Arthuro Escobar, in his legendary work *Encountering Development*, questions “why did the industrialized nations of North America and Europe come to be seen as the appropriate models of post-World War II societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America?” How did the postwar discourse on development actually create the so called Third World?”

Community mobilization, community development, community empowerment, gender equity, poverty eradication, etc. are the fundamental slogans of any mainstream development discourse. The Institute for Development Studies and Practices, IDSP-Pakistan, was conceived with recognition of fundamental dichotomies in the slogan and practice of these words. In the 1940s, US President Harry Truman made “underdevelopment” a keystone in U.S. foreign policy, and today, the “developed” nations are dedicated to helping their “underdeveloped” neighbors. But who benefits from “development”? Who among us does not worry when the leaders of the “First World” tell us they have a “strategy” for solving society’s “problems”?

Comprehensive mechanisms work to devise new slogans: interchangeable, meaningless words like “Development”, “Project”, “Strategy”, “Problem” continuously suppress, oppress, and repress people using the jugglery of words. Using moral terms, they claim to “fight against poverty,” which is an abstract effort; one can fight against greed or injustice, but how can one fight against something that so intangible?

IDSP-Pakistan was created witnessing stark dichotomies in actions and practices at all levels. We now understood that the game of development benefits the West and elites of Asian and African countries. To contest this, the Institute was established to encourage youth who would understand the politics and meaning of development from the community to the globe. Hopefully, these youth can then contribute, devising means for self-driven, self-motivated, and self-generated models to regain and regenerate the indigenous values, practices, processes and repressed knowledge based on local wisdom, folk literature, and folklore.

The fundamentals behind the organization was the belief—based on research, personal experiences, extended study of development, schooling, and media—that the dominant development notions ignore the richness of people’s knowledge, wisdom and creativity. IDSP thus denies the colonial logic of dominant development practices of

modernity and education (schooling), and then moves towards redefining the context and perspective of development and education (schooling), blending theory and practice.

The Institute engages with people based on three interrelated thematic areas: (1) understanding the colonial and imperial history of development; (2) learning and unlearning through the radical education and critical pedagogy; and (3) building self-esteem through the rich analysis and factual representation of culture, spirituality and social change. The Institute is a place to read some books, have generative discussions, and discuss difficult situations in a congenial, self disciplined manner. We discuss Chomsky, Freire, Michael Apple, Edward Said, Iqbal, Michel Foucault, Howard Zinn, Iqbal Ahmed, Gandhi, Ali Shariati, Ivan Illich, and other prominent dissidents.

We learn from radical, regenerative thoughts in literature, folk songs and religion. Work with communities follows exposure to radical thoughts, with emphasis on the power and richness of cultural heritage. The essence is that a country (Pakistan) which had military rule for more than half of its life, which suffers from imperialism, where the elite are the intellectuals, the nation is demoralized, yet a place where all variations of season are pervasive, where abundance of fruit of all variety is produced, where civilizations of more than five thousand years exist, which used to have one of the best irrigation systems, where the learning was part and parcel of lives of people. Yet this place has been dehumanized, deteriorated, and demolished in less than three hundred years.

These vast discrepancies in what is true and what is not were made possible by blending some very powerful ingredients. The first was to eliminate the sources of inspiration for the people that is their language. An elite language was not only introduced but other languages were systematically given sub-status. English speakers were accorded more value, would appear literate and considered modern. The other way came through the introduction of factory schooling, starting with a few missionary schools, but then becoming role models and structurally damaging the indigenous learning mechanisms at all levels in all fields.

IDSP did something interesting, radical if we may call it, bringing the youth from nooks and crannies of Pakistan into a generative learning discourse. The Institution teaches its analysis, focusing on understanding the North's invasion of the South, starting from the first ships that left Spain for trade purposes to the colonization of this part of the world to the current post colonial era. Studying the understanding of the presumably visible institutions of oppression, military regimes, economic institutions and institutions of schooling, media, and academia that use the platform of morality are questioned and synthesized.

The systemic analysis of schooling is prerequisite for moving towards regeneration of indigenous energies and regaining the lost wisdom of indigenous knowledge. The first question will be whether school is omnipresent. How to ridicule school? Should we reform schools? When this question is further processed, the question of an alternative looms large, as if the replacement of Coca Cola with Pepsi or some other black, fizzy drink changes anything.

If only we could understand that without modern institutions but with communities, people have survived through the ages of history, nurtured the organisms, valued nature, and lived with the understanding that nature is their friend. The notions of mother land and numerous folk stories depict that the love with nature was prevalent through all societies. The question then arises, What is IDSP? Are we a movement or an institution? The answer is simple and complex: "IDSP is an open learning space, which is independent of conventional, dominant definitions of institutions, structures, therefore the actions, practices and people in it define it naturally and organically".

The culture that exists in this part of the world is the source of inspiration for all, especially the youth. The school has only managed to blur the image. Once this blur is rectified then people start understanding the bigger picture and then based on their vision, the prevalent but obscure wisdom starts appearing. IDSP as a place has always been in continuous transformation, construction and deconstruction.

For the last six years, it has created structures based on a formal understanding of institutions and deconstructed them. It developed programs, questioned them, and recreated programs.

What resistance is to life, life is to resistance.

Working with people is like moving along a stream, the way the stream changes its course, so does the traveler. The discourses of religion, culture, and literature are considered to be alien to mainstream development. But the people's inspiration, their thought processes, and their lives are embedded in these. IDSP manages to include these and many others in the learning discourses to understand and question the formal notions.

IDSP is only the means to greater possibilities of hope, resistance to injustice, inequality, and global tyranny through humility, trust, justice, truth, love, care, mutual accountability, and transparency. When we ask why all the dissidents don't just start a movement against the repression and subjugation, the answer is complex and difficult, but some clue however could be found in Orwell's *Animal Farm*: what resistance is to life, life is to resistance.

Noam Chomsky reminds us: "If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, there is a possibility that you can contribute to making a better world. That's your choice."



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