

THE PROPER STUDY OF MANKIND - ST HELENA'S FIRST HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

by Trevor W. Hearl

At last St Helena has a manifesto aspiring to develop the potential of its most important resource, its people. The Human Development Report for St Helena 1999, sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme, presents the apparent paradox of a small island population admired by visitors as one happy family, 'friendly, welcoming and accommodating', but which in reality is just as conscious, even resentful, of its differences in wealth, class, district, creed, colour and race, as any other community. In addition it has self-inflicted problems and forms of cultural deprivation serious enough to threaten its future destiny.

The purpose of this frank, pioneering survey, therefore, is to jolt 'local politicians, opinion formers, aid donors (and) researchers' into focussing on issues affecting Islanders' personal development on the principle that 'every human being is born with particular potential capabilities that they have the right to develop to their utmost in a manner that is both sustainable and equitable'.

In his foreword, Governor Hollamby emphasises that 'in a country of limited natural resources it is imperative that we strive to develop our human capacity to its maximum potential', boldly promising to give the report a key role in guiding future policy. Written mainly by St Helena's own civil servants, but under the guidance of a UN Regional Director, what does this ninety-odd page document make of the Island's chances in this quest? Three dominant disabilities are said to inhibit Islanders' life chances today: their citizenship, physical isolation and aid dependence. Yet solving these problems could trigger greater ones. For example, if isolation were reduced by air access and tourism flourished, while the material quality of life should improve dramatically, the nature of the Island society would be altered radically.

Likewise, though British citizenship will open exciting possibilities for those able to take advantage of them, it will accelerate the 'brain drain', reducing public services and the life chances of those left behind.

Local politicians would be tempted to demand increased aid now raised to £29 million for 2000-2003 - further strengthening the dependency culture. The report concedes that St Helena already has good resources for personal, social and economic improvement in its provision for education, health and other public services.

NO REAL POVERTY

Furthermore, these are augmented privately by high levels of home ownership, private transport and leisure facilities, while the Island enjoys an unpolluted ocean environment, stable government, a legacy of law and order, and a community noted for its charity and sympathy for others where no one suffers real poverty. But,

the report warns, 'all the indicators are now going in the wrong direction. Education, 'the key to human development', is hamstrung by a dearth of qualified teachers, the schools having lost 80 per cent of their trained staff during the 1990s, producing results 'well below those in the United Kingdom'.

The health service, another 'critical aspect of human development', faces an even less promising future, being hit not only by loss of staff but also escalating demands and cost. Prescriptions for treating the Island's chronic ailments - diabetes, hypertension, alcoholism - have more than doubled in a decade to over 40,000 in a year, while a depleted staff struggles to cope with the rising needs of an ageing population.

CRIME AND DISORDER

The police, likewise, are overstretched with a force of mainly constables dealing with increasing crime and disorder - by Island standards - fuelled by alcohol and greater affluence. Nor does the more impressive performance of other vital services, from water and energy to fishing and fanning, seem to offer the report much consolation despite years of copious public investment, as it reflects the irony of Islanders' criticism of their vastly improved public services. The brain drain is viewed by the report as the main obstacle to fostering human development on St Helena.

RAMPANT MATERIALISM

Many Islanders will see it in another light, however. Emigration has been a feature of island life for generations, and though the Report blames 'rampant materialism' for luring professionally qualified Saints into menial work overseas, there are many other reasons for their exodus. Some need funds to build and furnish a home on the Island, others seek personal fulfilment or just escape from the 'goldfish bowl' of Island society; many followed the example of those who have 'maximised their potential' overseas in ways quite impossible at home. The case will currently come to many minds of the late lamented Lt Cdr William Rofe RN, a Half Tree Hollow boy, who became fluent in Arabic, French, German and Italian, while an adviser to the Sultan of Oman and Staff Officer at NATO HQ, serving also as a logistics officer in the Falklands War, and in retirement becoming a stalwart of his local church and charities. The St Helena 'family' must surely be accepted in the wider context of its 'diaspora', catering accordingly for the last of high-fliers so that the Island community is not impoverished by weakening its professional backbone.

Meanwhile another chronic dilemma is posed by demographic change, with the falling birth rate (164 to 66 a year, 1970-97) and rising life expectancy, threatening to transform St Helena - as this and other reports emphasise - into 'an island of the old, poor and unemployable'. In the immediate outlook, however, since family and neighbourhood support is crucial to 'maximising personal potential', the crux of the matter comes in the report's reflections on Community, the Family and Social Issues. Its observations are not reassuring. While noting the community's positive values of resourcefulness, friendliness to strangers and willingness to share, it re-

grets to find the dominant feature of family life to be 'insecurity'. More than a hundred parents have left children with relatives or friends to join 30 per cent of the workforce offshore, and although views vary on the effects of this, it is said to be putting a severe strain on children, parents and grandparents since the 'present disinclination to do something for nothing' has weakened the traditional role of the extended family.

Current lifestyle trends discouraging marriage are blamed for increasing illegitimacy, divorce, sexual abuse and domestic violence, 'especially against female partners [...] still regarded in some quarters as acceptable behaviour [...] (and) one of the Island's major social problems'. This is not quantified, however, perhaps because 'attitudes towards the law can be lax [...] (and) in relation to sexual offences [...] too forgiving'.

Yet today's social problems and prejudices have deep roots: the lighter the luckier is an old local adage, and the report would have done better to give local long term trends rather than comparisons with Britain (on illegitimacy, marriage, etc) as if the communities were comparable.

MALE STATUS SAPPED

Deeper inhibiting undercurrents in St Helena society are also hinted at. A reluctance to exercise authority, the expectation that boys will be manual workers, the handicap of bookless homes, the ill-effects of the 'macho' culture all these and other drawbacks are sapping male status. Though girls have usually outshone boys on St Helena for social and historical reasons, it has never been to the extent, as now, that men make up 70 per cent of the unemployed. This unforeseen outcome of ending sex discrimination at work is demoralising in a society which expects men to be the breadwinners, creating the paradox (notes the report) that, in a community where sexism is rife, women hold the majority of posts in government - and in all other professions, too, it might have added. Moreover, the lack of men teachers for boys will perpetuate the problem.

Some of society's more settled forms of inhibition, discouraging self-expression and 'enquiring minds', might usefully have been examined. Why, for example, despite isolation and their many talents, do St Helenians have a totally imported culture, an amalgam of East and West, generating no distinctive forms of its own, except perhaps in dialect? Canadian anthropologist, Tom Wiley, found only one in 1969, the saying *Bad go, worse come*, referring to British Colonial officials, signifying a cynicism engendered by the whims, and proximity, of government. Indeed the sheer weight of colonial administration on a village community is a major inhibiting factor in itself, stifling confidence and reinforcing society's disregard for its own past - its school history celebrates no Island heroes for they must await an emancipation of the spirit.

CLIMATE OF NEGATIVISM

Thus, even in a people noted for being easy going and hospitable to visitors, a climate of negativism, distrust and dependence persists, suppressing the development

both of a meritocracy (promotion being seen more as a mark of favouritism than merit) and a taste for scholarly self-improvement. The St Helena Government cannot expect to sell a policy of personal self-development merely on its merits.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

How then might this ambitious reform be set in motion? The report's Concept of Human Development asserts only that equal opportunities must be provided for all to choose their own 'lifestyle decisions', vague enough to allow ways and means to evolve. in the process. Yet clearly, despite its gloomy assessments, it expects improved provision for mental, physical and material well-being to impel Islanders towards self-improvement without other sources of motivation. For example, admitting that St Helenians consider themselves to be religious, it eschews spiritual or inspirational aid in its few comments on the role of religion. Allusions to impressive progress demonstrating the 'power of community action [...] especially (among) young people', might reasonably have prompted it to welcome these and other growth points which deserve nurturing in its cause - youth movements, music and art promotions, sporting activities, environmental and historical study centres and the like - but the report rarely reconnoitres possible lines of advance from such salients as already exist in its assessments of the future. Even the media, which should provide the shock-troops M the front line of popular enlightenment for stimulating a free flow of ideas and opinion, gets only cursory treatment. Plenty of stick, but where's the carrot?

Dare one say that, judging from the Island's present experience, the promotion of personal development would find its most effective agents among overseas staff working in the social services, where they come to serve, not to rule? Making virtue of a necessity, the shrewd recruitment of immigrant professionals and craftsmen would create a stronger, confident middle class, broaden horizons, and above all, forestall the doomsday forecast of St Helena as an island of 'the old, poor and unemployable' but redressing the isolating immigration policies of recent Island governments. This is not the report's view, admittedly, which concludes with the terse prescription: But if St Helena history teaches anything - lack of historical perspective is one of the report's main weaknesses - it is that top-down initiatives, however inspired, are doomed to failure. Change, especially beneficial change, evolves only after a favourable climate of opinion has been nurtured at the grass roots. St Helena's first Human Development Report nevertheless represents a bold initiative. Its value may prove to come less from its more contentious and discouraging opinions - many shared with its economic stablemate, the St Helena Strategic Review 2000-2010 - than its frankness in broaching issues which only a few years ago would have been taboo. Whether this independent freedom of expression reflects governmental glasnost behind a UN shield or the liberalising effects of Island television, it is to be welcomed and raises hopes that something will be done. St Helena's many friends - and Saints themselves, I trust - will await this outcome with interest. It may not do much for inward investment, but for those serving St Helena in any capacity it is quite simply essential reading.

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