

There is a vicious circle between poverty and ill health. How should the world work at local, regional, national and international level to break this circle? Justify your answer.

Prologue

Discussions grounded in even basic theories of development occur almost exclusively at university level or above. Considering the universally affecting nature of the topic, this seems absurd. Young audiences are taught at school about world wars — in all their horrors and oversimplified political complexities — and yet there is rarely a considered teaching of theories of development. What I would like to do is try to explain — simply — how poverty and ill health are connected, why this is a problem for development, and how this might be overcome. I have done this in parable form.

Chapter 1: Libertaria

In a lost part of a lost ocean, lies a floating island. This is Libertaria. Libertaria floats in The Current¹. The Current moves in a southerly direction and is constantly pushing the island south and further away from where tuna² — the islanders' favourite food — can be found.

The currency of Libertaria is the Bread Propeller, which was inadvertently discovered when a particularly lazy islander fell asleep during both the proving *and* the rather long baking stage of a batch of bread. The three-pronged, incredibly hard loaves that resulted may not have tasted any better than before, but at least they could also be used as propellers.

Around the same time as the baker was falling asleep — during a dare to dive under the island — one of the Libertarian teenagers (they liked to be called Liber-tearaways) had discovered that the roots of the mangrove trees, which protruded from the bottom of the island, rotated when their friends were climbing them above. It had taken a number of years before a particularly bright spark first hooked his bicycle chain up to one of them and attached a Bread Propeller to the root.

Pedalling the bicycle did create some force and it became apparent that enough propellers might well be able to push the island against the current towards the tuna fishing grounds. This in itself was enough for the residents of the island to start to trade them in exchange for other goods and, soon enough, Bread Propellers (or BPs) had become the *de facto* currency of Libertaria.³ Unfortunately however, it would require *a lot* of Libertarians all pedalling at the same time to get the island moving. It has been estimated that of the 1,031 inhabitants of the island, at least 800 would be required — all with enough BPs to spare one — in order to move the island upstream at any reasonable pace.

¹ A note on 'The Current': The Current can be roughly interpreted as a linear axis of 'development'. At the top (north) of the current are the most fertile fishing grounds teeming with fish and at the bottom lies an endless expanse of pretty, but ultimately empty, sea.

² A note on tuna fish: for all the islanders, tuna fish is, quite literally, the best thing ever. It's tasty, nutritious *and* doesn't taste like hard bread. Unfortunately, it's only found at the north of the current. It can also be taken as an allegory for comfortable wealth.

³ A note on Bread Propellers: BPs are used to illustrate that, though just a little money can buy food, this is a short-term solution. Moving beyond a subsistence lifestyle — i.e. when the money you earn is just spent on feeding your family — must be a long-term goal. The aim is to reach a point where everyone has enough money to feed their family on tuna and buy additional lifestyle enhancing things with the BPs that they no longer have to eat.

The last thing that needs to be known is that medicine on Libertaria is very primitive. Until recently, there was no means of fighting infection other than saline solution or, as the local doctor called it, “going for a swim in the sea”. Fortunately, a few years previously, one of the wealthier members of the island discovered that mixing slightly rancid yoghurt and a crushed beetle that had been discovered in some of the gardens of the richer islanders seemed to fight infections remarkably well. Unfortunately for the rest of the island, he quickly realised the value of what he was on to. So, in secret, collected all the beetles he could find on the island. Once he had a good supply, he could produce the mixture on demand and charge a hefty number of BPs for it. Sure enough, within two years, he had amassed a wealth of BPs as a result of the ‘Beetlejuice’⁴ he had created. What did it matter that some people had to forgo a few propeller meals in order to fight off the infection? He was doing great!

For the inhabitants of Libertaria, there was definitely great desire — and a great need — among the whole population to get to the tuna fishing grounds. The rich wanted it so that they could eat *more* tuna all the time, and the poor wanted it so that they didn’t have to eat the tasteless bread propellers each day. You might think that this would be easy to do as everyone could just attach their propellers to the mangrove roots and start pedalling on a bike: after all, there are more than the 800 people required to move upstream on the island. Unfortunately however, the current circumstances meant that the numbers of fit and healthy islanders who could actually pedal the island is about half of what is needed.

This is due to a combination of the following factors. Firstly, there are around 200 children and old people on the island who cannot pedal. Second, there are around 200 islanders who have infections or aren’t well — it seems there’s been a bug going around. Finally, of the roughly 600 fit adults remaining, only about half of them can afford to use their Bread Propellers for this, as they need to eat them instead (even if there’s a chance it does eventually lead to tuna). This has left the island at an impasse. The poor are unwilling to spend their time and energy making and pedalling Bread Propellers when there’s a risk that they won’t have any to feed their family and the rich are unwilling to give up their Bread Propeller wealth (or the recipe for ‘Beetlejuice’) as they can buy the few tuna available. Most annoyingly of all though, the children just aren’t growing up fast enough — how inconsiderate of them! So, for now, Libertaria just continues to float downstream...

Chapter 2: Equitabia

Just over the southern horizon, unbeknownst to Libertaria, there is another floating island called Equitabia. In the much the same way that Old World and New World Vultures convergently evolved (look it up, it’s very interesting), Equitabia shares almost all of the same characteristics as Libertaria, despite having never come into contact with its neighbour. Equitabians share the Libertarian love of fish and desperately want to move the island to the north too (though unlike their neighbours, they like their tuna cooked).

Until about a year ago, a small group of rich Equitabians often sat around discussing life, the universe and everything. During one of these discussions, a member of the group happened upon a realisation. The realisation was that; whilst having all these

⁴ A note on Beetlejuice: Beetlejuice can be taken as an analogy for penicillin or almost any medical intervention that will significantly improve health (and reduce the number of DALYs lost).

BPs was very nice, if the Equitabians could move the island really far north, everyone would be able to eat tuna. Maybe then his cobbler would be able to make him that nice pair of shoes he'd promised him before his wife had got ill? Currently all the cobbler did was care for his sick wife and bake Bread Propellers for the family to eat.

“What if...” The rich Equitabian said out loud. “What if we gave some of the poor islanders some of our Bread Propellers? Wouldn't we have enough people to move the island?” Actually, that wasn't a bad idea at all, and after explaining the merits of the idea to his friends — namely, that they would have an endless supply of tuna and who knows what other fish they might find — they agreed to take it forward as an idea. At the island meeting, there was a lot excitement about the idea. The cobbler then raised his hand and pointed out that, even if he had enough propellers to feed his family and attach to the mangrove, someone had to look after his sick wife.

There was silence in the room and the sound of bottoms shifting uncomfortably on seats. After some minutes of collective thinking had passed, a self-styled 'mad scientist' quietly suggested giving some of the mysterious mixture⁵ he'd been working on to the cobbler. Of course, this offer made everyone else that was sick want some too. So, after much argument, it was eventually decided that, for the good of all the islanders' love of tuna, they would all be provided with some of the scientist's mixture and an extra propeller.

A few months later, on a Monday morning, all 900 Equitabians who had agreed to take part marched to their bike stations, and started pedalling. At first, it seemed like nothing was happening, but with some readjustments led by the scientist, all the propellers were pointed in the same way and the island began to move. It was a very tiring process and the rich Equitabians that were directing the pedalling had to hand out many more bread propellers to feed the cyclists than they originally intended. One even gave some of his tuna fish out.

The sacrifice was worth it. Within a few days, the Equitabians could begin to see the previously barren sea coming to life with mackerel — not as nice as tuna, but still good. This was starting to make people happier and stronger, which in turn meant they could pedal faster. Before long, each cyclist had grown strong and experienced enough that shift patterns started to emerge. This meant Equitabia could travel by both day and night towards the fabled tuna grounds.

One morning, a cyclist on the way to her shift saw a faint shape in the distance. As the shape drew closer, it became clear that it was another island. This was most unusual! A delegation of rich Equitabians quickly set off bearing gifts to the new island. They were welcomed on the beach by the rich Libertarians who couldn't believe their luck at finding such interesting new friends! After a few days getting to know each other, one of the Equitabians explained how they'd finally got the propeller system to work. The idea of giving away Bread Propellers (and even tuna) caused quite a stir and it wasn't until one of the Equitabians shouted “TUNA!” that the Libertarians piped down for long enough to hear that, in the long run, the rich of Equitabia would have more too.

⁵ The 'mysterious mixture' was, in fact, Beetlejuice, but he didn't want to tell anyone that he'd just found a bottle on the beach and copied its contents.

Chapter 3: A regional collaboration

After a week or so discussing everything from politics, to mysterious mixtures, to sport, both islands agreed that their mutual aim of tuna was compelling enough to work together. It was agreed that some Libertarians would go to Equitabia to help refine the Beetle juice mixture, while the Equitabians would layout how exactly they'd got the island moving, so the Libertarians could use a similar model themselves. After two or three months preparing, both islands — now joined by a number of hemp ropes⁶ — were ready to set off. There were definitely some differences between the two peoples — not least, how they ate their tuna — but the ropes were long enough that they could move north together and not antagonise one another.

It's fair to say that the poor Libertarians couldn't believe their luck: not only had they been given some of the BPs of the rich, but Beetlejuice didn't have to cost five weeks baking! They launched into the pedalling with zeal and, using Equitabia as a guide, Libertaria started to move north against the current also.

It's worth noting at this point that, had either of these two islands developed space travel, and thus, satellite imaging, they would have been able to see that The Current they had so desperately been trying to fight was actually the mind-bogglingly big exhaust of an equally large jet-powered continent⁷. Since it had moved on from propellers many years ago was now slowly, but steadily moving north in search of fresh fishing grounds.

After many months of pedalling, the inhabitants of the now-joined smaller islands became aware that the current was getting stronger, but the tuna was still moving north. To combat this, additional riders were called up. This worked for about a week before The Current was again too much. The Equitabian scientist had a plan. This involved him sitting in a catapult with a very large counter-weight on the other side. Wrapped up in as much protective coconut husk as possible, he gave the signal and the counter-weight was dropped. As the scientist flew miles into the air he could see over the horizon, and there an island, infinitely bigger than anything he had ever seen. It seemed to be powered by some kind of jet and, as he hurtled towards this newly discovered land, he wondered if he would make out alive. Fortunately for him, he did.

Chapter 4: International cooperation

The scientist came to in a white bed that felt like it had been stuffed with chickens and around him were many strangely dressed people. It was apparent that they were healers of some kind, but not like those on the island. Once he had regained his strength, the scientist explained — with a series of diagrams and maps — where he had come from and what it was he was doing appearing out of thin air. The inhabitants of the large island were fascinated by this stranger and agreed to have a look at what was going on by the exhaust of the moving continent. Initial scouts confirmed what the Equitabian had conveyed; there were indeed two small islands in

⁶ This rope does, of course, represent the regional stage.

⁷ A note on 'The Continent': This massive island can be interpreted as 'high income countries', unaware that their demand is pushing back the low income ones.

their wake, and it was decided that they would turn down the continental engines to allow Libertaria and Equitabia to catch up with the continent.⁸

It's very difficult to explain how the Libertarians and Equitabians dealt with discovering the continent. For most, it was an immense sense of awe, which quickly became incredulity when they discovered tinned tuna in the supermarket. It seemed here that everyone had what he or she wanted. Though this wasn't strictly true, it was the case that all the inhabitants of The Continent had more than enough tuna to eat. They also had stopped eating bread propellers years ago, as no one had ever really liked them anyway. Now, they were just used to buy things. The Continent had even pooled its BPs so that, in case of emergency, there would be enough BPs to feed everyone or buy Beetlejuice if required. The islanders really thought this was a clever system.

Both islands agreed to be joined to the continent by long ropes that would allow them to operate in their traditional way (plus tuna), but not so long that they would ever fall into the current again. For those young islanders, who were now growing up, they could move to the continent. Many of them did and brought with them a valuable wealth of knowledge, particularly in regards to bread baking and bicycle manufacturing techniques. It was a fantastic development that benefitted all.

Epilogue

So, what does this all mean? Well, here's what I was trying to get across:

1. Low-income countries must work at a local and national (island) level to redistribute the little resources they have in order to move forward. As the rich Equitabians realised, if the rich were to give up just a little of their wealth, the poor would be able to focus less on day to day survival and more on getting out of poverty and then contributing to national prosperity.

2. Ill health and poverty is a vicious circle that prevents those in poverty from helping propel the country 'forward'. A healthy population means more people can contribute (pedal). Thus, providing a basic standard of healthcare (Beetlejuice) is essential for reaching a critical mass health so that progress can be made.

3. Working together in regional blocks (the ropes joining the islands) makes breaking the cycle faster. Not only can peoples gain new systems and ideas, they can start to lean on each other economically and create bargaining power.

4. High-income countries (The Continent) need to consider the consequences of their actions. By powering ahead with disregard for low-income countries, they are ruining their chances of ever achieving a sustainable economy (the fertile tuna fishing grounds). By lowering trade barriers and legal frameworks such as intellectual property and import taxes, low-income countries can be given a fair chance at reaching their goals. This extends to cooperating at an international level (the ropes) with low-income countries and providing help, but also allowing them to keep their distance and not imposing too many restrictions on nations that are more than capable of moving forward on their own: if the conditions are right.

⁸ 'Turning down the continental engines' should be considered the lowering of trade barriers and legal frameworks that prevent low-income regions from accessing high-income markets.