REFORMS AND REFORMERS: MICHAEL CERNEA AT THE WORLD BANK

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Abstract

The institutional and organizational change was the subject of a rich literature for a long time. There are several specialized fields (e.g., institutional economics, organizations theory etc.) and interdisciplinary approaches focused on the understanding and predicting changes of institutions and organizations, much being related to the business sector and politics or government affairs. Far more less research has been done on the changing of international organizations like IMF and World Bank than on common organizations in business and society. The World Bank has periodically changed its approach on the development of poor countries and its technique of project management, but these facts were treated as answers to the challenges coming from the new realities of world economy. Somehow, the inside actors who have developed new ideas for the most important agency of international development were neglected. One of those main thinkers from within, creating a socio-cultural paradigm of the development, is Michael Cernea. He has introduced the social analysis as an important dimension throughout the project cycle and created an impetus for the changing of Bank policy. In addition, social organization and cultural heritage in the areas of projects funded by the World Bank have been considered targeted objectives after Michael Cernea’s Putting People First was published.

The papers aims at shortly presenting Michael Cernea’s life, ideas and scientific contributions, emphasizing his original thinking on the development of poor countries. It is a narrative essay divided in four parts: part one- background and professional development; part two- scientific work and main contributions to the development literature; part three- international recognition; part four- conclusions.

Key words: econo-centric and techno-centric paradigm of development, induced development, social analysis of projects

Many years ago, Konrad Adenauer said that: “We all live under the same sky, but not all of us have the same horizon”. In a metaphorical sense, Dr Michael CERNEA’s intellectual and professional horizon is so vast and complex, that it is almost impossible to capture it in a brief presentation. We find it impossible to do justice to his merits because we cannot fully capture the truth about his work as a researcher, promoter of the change of the organizational culture of the most important development agency - the World Bank -, and tireless seeker of a better world. We find ourselves, therefore, in the realm of being speechless. Nevertheless, the thought that Cernea has already been the subject of pertinent studies and monographies urges us to try to highlight a few aspects of his exemplary life. His has been a life combined with praiseworthy harmony, inquisitiveness, intellectual energy and penetration, creativity, moral courage and professional ethics. This has led to his

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capacity to accomplish plans and bring them to perfection in lasting actions, as well as compassion for the silent majority of the poor.

1 Background and Professional Development

Michael CERNEA was born in Iasi and spent his childhood here, at a time of exacerbated identity vanities and local fundamentalism. That was a time when the failures and incapacities of the majority were blamed, out of shallow destitution of reason and civic spirit, on the population considered foreign. In the city that had laid the foundations of critical spirit in Romania, he could not enjoy a very peaceful life. In an interview given to Judith Freidenberg in 2003 for the Society for Applied Anthropology, he recalled the pogrom and deprivation of those troubled years. Towards the end of the World War II, he left for Bucharest, with his family, where he continued his education.

As a teenager, he started working for a newspaper and practiced journalism for a few years. In the first years that followed WWII, promises of social, institutional and political changes seemed to be in the air. For those who wanted to mend nefarious things from the past and to contribute to the development of a better society, journalism, and reporting in particular, constituted an attracting field. However, illusions never last long for lucid spirits. Michael Cernea became aware, quite early, of where the political regime in Romania was heading. Years later, as he confessed in the above-mentioned interview: “... the democratic social changes evaporated rapidly. And soon thereafter, our hopes about what those political changes would accomplish also began to evaporate”.

However, the wish to understand the causes of social changes motivated him to pursue higher education in Philosophy. “I did believe then – he declared in 2003 - and I do believe now, that no social change can happen without a theory to guide it, without knowledge to inform and inspire it, a theory that might help us make choices at the many crossroads which societies face at every turn”.

After graduating from the School of Philosophy in Bucharest University, Cernea prepared his PhD dissertation, completed in 1962. He became a researcher affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy in the Romanian Academy. In this institution, his sound education, professional integrity, moral courage and assiduous work, enabled him to gradually overcome the ideological restrictions of the would-be scientific Socialism theory. During a time of relative liberalization, he revived the tradition of sociological research in post-war Romania. He organized and coordinated field research, thus capitalizing on his knowledge of the studies of Dimitrie Gusti’s Monographic School of Rural Sociology. Between 1966 and 1968, Cernea coordinated a sociological research project in two rural settlements, Belinț (Timiș district) and Comana (Constanța district), which had been the object of Gusti’s ethnographies, more than three decades before. Though it had the limitations inherent in social research of that period, the results of the research, constitute an analytical and methodological reference frame for those interested in understanding and predicting evolutions in the Romanian rural environment. Additionally, this project supported the development of his research with the World Bank.

In the late 1960s, Cernea was acknowledged as a reputed sociologist and was invited to international conferences and congresses. In 1967, he was awarded a research scholarship by the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études and by the Centre d’Etudes Sociologistiques from Paris. In the academic year 1970 - 1971, he was a guest researcher in the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, where he met and worked with some of the most renowned American sociologists. Twenty five years later, the distinguished Romanian sociologist considered that: “It was a wonderful year, between November 1970 and November 1971. During that year, I met many great social scientists, including Robert Merton, top level political scientists, economists, anthropologists, social
psychologists, legal scholars, and so on.” However, his extraordinary academic experiences and his access to top international social researchers, were not duly appreciated when Cernea returned to Romania. The officials argued that he had deviated from the ideology of scientific Marxism in favor of bourgeois Sociology. In 1974, after a whole battle with ideology and censorship, he succeeded to publish *American Sociology – Conversations with American Sociologists: Immanuel Wallerstein, Elliot Aronson, Reuben Hill, Alvin Bertrand, Stanton Wheeler, John Kunkel*.

During that summer of the year 1974, he was invited by the *American Sociological Association* to the World Congress of Sociology in Toronto. Participation in this Congress, with financial support from the American Sociological Association, marked a turning point for Cernea. It was on that occasion that he “defected” from the social system of “compulsory happiness” and entered the free world. In that same year, he was hired by the World Bank, as a sociologist and anthropologist.

In his pioneering work with this institution, his unusual professional duties and determination to carve out a distinctive role for the social analysis of development projects, did not hinder his engagement with the academic world and his passion for research. Cernea’s prestigious international career did not fully coincide with his exceptional professional career in the World Bank. While in the World Bank, he rose to the position of *Senior Social Adviser for Social Policy and Sociology* and *Chairman* of the *Social Research Group*, as a scholar, he stayed permanently attuned to developments in the academia.

Between September 1979 and July 1980, Cernea was a researcher in residence at *The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences*. Later, between September 1989 and August 1990, he was a *visiting scholar* in the *Department for Anthropology and Harvard Institute for International Development* at *Harvard University*. In addition to these research endeavors, conducted outside the World Bank, could be mentioned numerous conferences and training seminars in Developmental Anthropology and Sociology, held in universities, research institutes, professional associations, regional development banks and other organizations from all over the world.

When Dr. Michael Cernea retired from office in 1997, after almost 25 years of service in the World Bank, he continued his extensive career as a researcher and consultant. His research and consulting activity have continued with equal intensity since his retirement. Beginning with 1998, he was chosen as a *Senior Social Adviser* for the Middle East and Northern Africa with the World Bank. In recognition of his vast experience in international development and remarkable scientific contributions, Dr. Cernea also holds the prestigious position of *Research Professor for Anthropology and International Business* at *George Washington University, Washington D.C.*

### 2 Scientific work and main contributions to the development literature

Certainly, an overview of Dr Michael CERNEA’s education and professional and academic career reveals a personality that has distinguished itself in research and the practice of development programs. In addition, his international professional trajectory, from a rural sociologist and anthropologist in a newly created World Bank department, to the position of President of a group of social researchers, has been grounded and supported by his continued scientific activity. Cernea’s creative research has inspired many, and it has set new trends in social theory and founded a new development policy. Moreover, the pre-war ideals of another great Romanian sociologist, Dimitrie Gusti, and his concepts of *Sociologia Cogitans* and *Sociologia Militans*, have gained currency and international exposure based on the work of Dr Michael Cernea.
“A man’s destiny is his character”, wrote a famous writer once. This statement could very adequately describe Cernea’s professional and academic live. His distinguished character and high ethical ideal have nourished and consolidated development ideas, as well as complex analytical and applied visions and incursions. In addition, through his research on forms of social organization and social actors, Cernea appears to have transgressed the borders of traditionally distinct fields of science.

Through several decades of research on social processes, Cernea has rigorously and judiciously amended the wertfrei ideal of social science, as it had been spelled out by Max Weber. Social science cannot be separated from ethical values, as it deals with people, beliefs, institutions and the countless circumstances in which these parts interact. The understanding of social life, produced by positive analysis, must, to a certain extent, be followed by its improvement, which is the expression of normative analysis. Yet, in the realm of the social, norms can be nothing but Paretoan abstraction, because society is not a simple mechanical combination of statistical figures. As Burke would say, society is a communion of those who live in the present with those who passed away and those who will come in the future. The prescriptive function of social science, which complements its explanatory and predictive function, does not address statistical, macro-aggregative measures, but instead deals with the social conscious of human beings, each of whom has his or her own movement principle.

From the beginning of his scientific research, Cernea has been preoccupied with the scope of this communion, as well as with the ways to enact social reform. However, the reputed Romanian sociologist, given the then ideological and bureaucratic constrains, could not bring to fruition his valuable potential as an engaged social observer and strong creator. His career as an international researcher, innovator of development programs and policies, and activist for the ethical values of social science, started with his employment in the World Bank. He was the first staff sociologist and anthropologist of this institution, immediately coming to office as the organization’s then-President, Robert McNamara, had launched a program to diminish poverty in Third-World countries.

There was no precedent for the analysis of social development projects, and the World Bank strategy and policies were dominated by the econocentric and technocentric development paradigm. Simply stated, based on Keynes’ macroeconomics and the neoclassical models of economic growth, it was believed that what prevented poor countries from acceding to a state of prosperity was nothing but the lack of Western technology and fixed assets. As these countries were prisoners of a vicious circle of poverty, and because they lacked money to finance comprehensive investment and produce the cumulative causation of economic growth, the World Bank was assisting and financing large scale development projects in the infrastructure, economical sectors and possibly, the social sector.

The big push strategy of economic growth, accompanied by modern technology, should have set the respective countries on a trajectory of sustainable development. The only variables considered in the projects were economical and technological, and the infallible method of cost-benefit analysis. Many such projects had failed, and the poor did not gain the benefits that they had been promised because the policies were not based on sound economical principles and analyses. The positive outcomes that had been achieved by prior projects were, in fact, dramatic instances of economical growth without development.

World Bank officials believed that the project writing process had deficiencies and that the social analysis of rural development might have a relevant role, since the overwhelming majority of the poor lived in rural areas. But nothing was clear at that point. In this context, without definite attributions or a comprehensive job description, Dr Cernea was faced with a huge challenge. Years later, with humor and self-irony, this reputed sociologist compared his mission in the Bank to that of the Austrian Cardinal Franz Konig at
the Vatican. Pope John Paul the Second had appointed Konig as Secretary to the Non-Believers. The Cardinal ignored what precisely he had to do, and so did the Holy Father. Similarly, Cernea assumed the role of Secretary to the Non-Believers in the World Bank. In those days, those who had any faith in the social analysis of development projects were few in number. Cernea’s task was to convert the social non-believers.

Dr Cernea capitalized on his experience in empirical research and on his vast knowledge in numerous fields of social science. He also became quickly acquainted with economic analysis and the Bank’s management procedures in development projects. Further, he worked hard and wished to succeed where others had failed. This is how he managed to propose and gradually impose a new vision on development.

First, development is not a linear economic process, as it has been conceptualized on the basis of the model suggested by the American historian and economist Walt Rostow. Cernea instead argued that development is a complex socio-cultural process; in order to understand it, one needs to study the patterns of social organization, the social actors, the context in which production and trade unfold, as well as specific institutions.

“Development - argues Cernea- is not about commodities. It is not even about new technologies or information highways. It is about people, their institutions, their knowledge, their forms of social organization.”

Second, Cernea elaborated a clear distinction between spontaneous development, which social science studies and describes, and induced development. The latter has a pre-established goal, it is accelerated and programmed, frequently guided by policy based on mix of knowledge and assumptions. Social science has, in this situation, a prescriptive role, to ground reforms. Induced development is achieved and coordinated by projects, and the World Bank’s activity is concerned with managing projects and not with financing them.

“Financially-induced development interventions - said Cernea in Social Organization and Development Anthropology, The 1995 Malinowski Award Lecture - are planned programs for social development and social change, not just for economic growth. Social analysis… represents… the methodology for clarifying the social and behavioral mechanisms of development and change.”

Development projects are not limited to investment and technical-economical operations; they are social processes which circumscribe a wide range of various social actors. The study of the motivations and behaviors of social actors involved in development, and of a project’s cultural and institutional context, is the province of Sociology and Anthropology. No other theory or approach can substitute social analysis in induced development. The role of social analysis is not marginal, in the ex-post project evaluation; on the contrary, it is central in ex-ante evaluation. It has to inform, ground and prescribe each stage in a cycle project’s cycle. Without prior social analysis, projects are exposed to the risk of never meeting essential objectives: increasing justice and reducing poverty via development.

In the field of theory, Cernea has contributed significantly, along with Albert Hirschman and Amartya Sen, to the creation of the socio-cultural paradigm in development. In addition, he has grounded and established the concept of social actors in development, (persons, families, informal groups, local organizations and administrations) all of which are actively involved in the modernization process. This concept is closely related to another theoretical contribution that he has made, namely the concept of participative development.

“The Population – stated Dr Cernea in the 2003 interview - is not a passive guinea pig in technology transfer programs. In fact, ultimately, it is the decisive actor. People have to absorb technology, to rise to it, to create a new capacity through adjusted social organization. New technologies – whether in agriculture, in industry or in any other sector – have to be incorporated within specific social contexts and societies. Creating
new institutions and patterns of social organization to shoulder and internalize such changes is a totally different thing than simply the purchase and “transfer” of technology.... “putting people first” is the crux of any development project.”

In the field of methodology, Cernea has elaborated on the **matrix of entrance points for social knowledge and practices in the stages of a project’s cycle.** Theoretical and empirical research from his first 10 years at the World Bank culminated in the publication of *Putting People First*, in 1985. The book had considerable impact in the international academic environment and with various development agencies. It occasioned the first rigorous and convincing discussion of how crucial social analysis is to induced development. Also, it initiated the transposition of sociological and anthropological concepts and theories in instruments for the analysis of sectorial projects.

The book was translated in many languages all over the world, and constitutes the conceptual and methodological support for academic programs in the development of both theoretical and empirical research, and in working documents and the official reports of international development agencies and of other organizations in the field. The successes that the book has enjoyed have led to the publication of a second edition in 1991. However, in order to **convert non-believers** in the World Bank, the arguments in the book were only the first part – the **intellectual argument**, according to Dr Anthony Bebbington.

The most difficult part of the conversion work - translating social concepts and theories into institution policies and procedures - continued for more than a decade and by the time Cernea retired from his official position, this research led to a much waited for outcome: the creation of a **task force** to supervise social development operations within the World Bank.

*Thus – wrote Dr Bebbington – another area in which Cernea contributed greatly was in developing and implementing operational directives and operational policies that required projects to have social appraisals. This contribution, if less visible to outside readers, was critical if any institutional change was to derive from his ideas.”*

Thanks to his tenacity, persuasiveness and considerable international reputation, the **Social Development Department** was founded in 1997, employing over 130 sociologists and anthropologists. With real satisfaction, with more than 10,000 employees at the World Bank, Dr Cernea considered that he succeeded to create the largest group of social scientists in the world, who work under the same organizational umbrella.

**Putting people first** represents the unifying element and the core thesis of Dr Cernea’s impressive and engaged activities in research, education and professional training, consulting and institutional reform. **Development Sociology and Development Anthropology** are more indebted to him than to anyone else for their institutionalization and progress of knowledge. These scientific disciplines have evolved in parallel with his research and insightful contributions. Dr Cernea’s experience in the social appraisal of a huge number of projects in countries from all continents has constituted, along the years, a substantial pool of empiric data. On this ground, he has generated the theory and analytical instruments in induced development.

The originality of Cernea’s work as a sociologist and anthropologist is embedded not only in the creative application of theoretical social knowledge (**knowledge for understanding**), for the development of practical knowledge (**knowledge for action**), but also in the creation of new theories and models. An excellent example is the **theory of involuntary displacement and resettlement**, caused by development projects in infrastructure, agriculture, energy and urban environment. Dr Bebbington considers this treatise: “of most significance perhaps – both intellectually and also for human welfare – has been his work on involuntary resettlement, risk and vulnerability.”

Cernea has throughout his career been preoccupied with the human effects of induced development and he approached the lives of the poor with sensitivity and compassion. Thus,
he noticed that in all situations, even when development projects are well designed and managed, they generate dramatic social costs. Over the last two decades of the 20th century, more than 200 million people, most of whom were very poor, were displaced, and involuntarily resettled away from the areas where development projects were implemented. Cernea’s long list of published papers in academic journals and publishing houses, as well as a significant set of guidelines for World Bank policies, stand as testimony to his renowned endeavors and contributions. A listing of a few of these works follows:


**Anthropological Approaches to Resettlement: Policy, Practice and Theory**, (Senior editor with Scott Guggenheim), Boulder, Co: Wesview Press, 1993;


**The Economics of Involuntary Resettlement: Questions and Challenges**, The World Bank, 1999

The volume and quality of Cernea’s theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of involuntary displacement and resettlement has been acknowledged both in the academia, and in international organizations. Thus, in 1991, he established for OECD, the **Guidelines for AID Agencies on Involuntary Displacement and Resettlement in Development Projects**.

Cerneea’s research on displacement and involuntary resettlement has not been a plea against development projects, but instead created solid theoretical and empirical arguments for the cautious approach of modernization, by involving and consulting with the poor. Vulnerability and loss due to involuntary displacement are not simply material, as the traditional principles of compensation would advocate. The greater problem is the destruction of social, cultural and institutional contexts of the displaced population. This loss often cannot be quantified, and the method of cost-benefit analysis offers an insufficient and precarious compensation of the persons affected by induced development.

Cerneea has elaborated an **Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction Model**, of a solid analytical argumentation and real instrumental value. This model offers both the necessary framework to establish the eight risk categories induced to populations that have been displaced due to development projects, and the ways to counter them by programmed reconstruction. Several of his published papers on this topic still very relevant on these topics are:

“**The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced Populations**”, *World Development* 25(10), 1569-88, 1997;

**Risks and Reconstruction: Experiences of Resettles and Refugees** (Co-edited with Chris McDowell), The World Bank, 2000;

“**Eight Main Risks: Preventing Impoverishment During Population Resettlement**”, in de Wet, C. And Fox, R. (eds), *Transforming Settlement in Southern*
The Cernea Model has gained world-wide value and recognition and it has been used in all research and policies concerned with involuntary displacement induced by development projects.

In recent years, Cernea has investigated two major problems of development programs and projects, which had lightly addressed previously in the induced development literature, are: the protection of the cultural heritage in areas subjected to modernization and the reinsertion of culture in agricultural research. The papers published in 2001, *Cultural Heritage and Development: A Framework for Action in the Middle East and North Africa*, and in 2006, *Researching the Culture In Agriculture: Social Research for International Agricultural Development*, demonstrate both the continuity of his preoccupation for the role of culture in the analysis of development projects, an ever pressing feature of his professional work. In fact, the *Culture & Agriculture Journal* dedicated a whole issue (*Spring 2006, Vol. 28, No. 1*) to the discussion of his contributions.

Dr. Cernea’s professional work is evidenced in articles published in the most prestigious social sciences journals, chapters published in the proceedings of international conferences, studies, technical reports and good practices guides in the field of social policy elaborated for the World Bank and other international organizations, speeches given in front of academic and professional associations and presentations given to large universities in the world.

Perhaps nothing could more adequately express Dr Michael Cernea’s lifelong contributions than Anthony Bebbington’s essay: “Cernea’s lasting contributions to development are many, reflected in a long list of publications, advisory roles and academic honors. Perhaps the most important among them, however, will be to have changed an institution through the sustained and forceful insistence on a few ideas: that social science knowledge is critical to development, that induced development will fail in meaningful sense if ordinary people are not involved in shaping the forms it takes, and that the cherished disembodied concepts of so much development theory cannot be considered separately from the social structures in which they are embedded. Whether and for how long the Bank will continue to reflect these victories on the battlefields of knowledge depends on geopolitics as much as intellectual debate, but even if there is a reversal in the shifts that Cernea helped win, to have changed the institution’s practices during the three decades he has spent there means that his ideas, and his work, will have affected literally millions of lives forever.”

3 International Recognition

Dr. Cernea’s scientific and professional merits have been acknowledged both in his adoptive country, the United States of America, and at the World Bank, an institution which he served with devotion and critical spirit. Finally, these works were also acknowledged in many well-known universities and academic associations all over the world. Thus, in 1988, the *American Anthropological Association* offered him the *Solon T. Kimball Award* for remarkable contributions to Applied Anthropology and Public Policy.

In 1995, the *International Society for Applied Anthropology* gave Cernea the *Bronislaw Malinowski Award* in recognition of scholarly efforts to understand and serve the needs of the world through social science. On that occasion, Cernea gave a memorable speech on the role of social science and the anthropologists and sociologists’ missions to
heal the *development illness* and to help society progress. He challenged the *ivory tower* and the *office social theory*, by presenting his intellectual credo and Gusti’s ideal of *Sociologia Militans*. In the *Foreword* to Dr Cernea’s *Social Organization and Development Anthropology*, a published speech, Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President of the World Bank, stated:

“It is a great pleasure to see one of our most distinguished colleagues recognized both inside and outside the Bank [World] for the vision, the intellectual rigor, and the consistency with which he has carried his message to the development community and to the social science community over the past two decades.

Michael Cernea is a giant among the social scientists applying sociology and anthropology to the problems of development. He has stood firm for the need to address the social issues of development long before it became fashionable to do so. He has brought clarity of thinking and practical wisdom to the tasks at hand, both inside and outside the Bank.” 12

When Cernea retired from the World Bank, his disciples and colleagues published a special volume dedicated to him, entitled *Michael Makes His Mark: The Life and Times of a Change Agent in the World Bank*, (1998). It is worth mentioning a fragment from the entry that Robert McNamara - the World Bank’s President at the time - contributed to the book: “As the first sociologist hired by the Bank to monitor programs that approached poverty everywhere in the developing world, you have accomplished this task with grace. You will be long remembered as a tireless champion of the poor and a stimulating force in imposing the Bank’s social agenda. Tens of millions of the poorest of the poor are indebted to you.”

Dr Cernea is member of numerous editorial boards, professional associations and scientific boards all over the world. To list them all would be burdensome. For reasons of brevity, we shall name only a few of the positions that he has in the world of the academic and professional community. He is a member of the editorial board of *Journal of Applied Sociology* (U.S.A.), *Journal of Refugee Studies* (Oxford, Great Britain), *Forced Migration Review* (Oxford), *Field Methods – Cultural Anthropology* (U.S.A.), *International Journal of Rural Cooperation* (Israel), etc.

Throughout his brilliant scientific and professional career, Cernea became a member of many prestigious academic institutions, such as: *American Sociological Association, American Anthropological Association, European Society for Rural Sociology, International Sociological Association, International Association for Impact Assessment, and International Rural Sociology Association.*

In addition, Dr Cernea is current member of the *Scientific Board at Swiss Academy for Development; elected fellow of American Association for the Advancement of Sciences; member of the Technical Committee of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research* (CGIAR), which groups together the most prestigious agricultural research institutes from all over the world; *senior adviser* for Social Policy Group (Switzerland), and consultant for many other public and professional organizations.

Many would advocate that the more an intellectual devoted to understanding the needs of common people and to reforming the circumstances of their lives is involved in academic and public institutions the better it is for all humanity. Countless intelligent and educated people have tailored ideologies for a *perfect society* or offered their knowledge and skills to serve scientific institutions created for them by others. The Social Sciences, among which those in the field Economics would have liked to reign supreme, created models for the use and abuse of revolutions. The glory previously coveted by military rulers should have come to *social engineers*. *Development ideology*, as William Easterly has recently defined all centralist and bureaucratic models of social happiness, partially illustrates this fact. 13
“Certain approaches to inducing development – noted Dr Cernea - embody a common, vastly damaging conceptual bias: they underestimate the socio-cultural structures of real societies. Such reductionist models of social change become painfully obvious in the design of some development projects.”

Very few scholars have chosen moderation and caution in social reform, that kind of piecemeal social reform, which Karl Popper considered the main purpose of social theory, in total opposition to utopian social engineering. However, Cernea chose the modest role of advisor unknown to the anonymous masses of poor people. He set them free from the canons of social mechanics and found that the ultimate goal of science is to climb down from the high skies to the geography peopled by beings with a soul, a mind and a body. The following fragment reveals a part of his intellectual credo: “The professional social analyst must also be ever aware of the imperfection of this [social] knowledge, and must formulate recommendations with requisite prudence and ethical responsibility.”

4 Conclusions

Indeed, to put theory and analysis to the service of social development means to accept the law of non-intended consequences, as it was interpreted in the Post-war period by American sociologist Robert Merton and Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek, while working on Ferguson and Hume’s intellectual legacy. More than that, this treatise means to raise an eye toward and question seemingly perfect rational constructions. To admit that no human mind and no artificial intelligence system can think for the whole world, is the profound expression of moral duty and intellectual honesty. Further, to co-engage reason, passion and faith in scrutinizing and mending various social ways, means to put people, their needs, feelings and wishes, above anything else. This is how Cernea has worked, with modesty, devotion, analytical rigor, intellectual passion and social compassion, living a life that has been dedicated to understanding social processes while reforming the living conditions of the poor. At the same time, he has transmitted an unsettling message to the academic environment, where it has often been the case that splendid and well-meant become illusory programs of social progress, which mistake ideological discussions for actual social needs.

Dr. Cernea has decisively contributed to the assertion of an ideal that is shared by few: common people can be trusted to manage their own life. Therefore, the role of the experts lies in facilitating personal projects within an improved social framework, and not in planning the lives of the poor according to models that are not understood.

References

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Notes

2. Idem, p.6
6. Idem, p.17
10. See Anthony Bebbington, cit.op., p.70
11. Idem, p.71
15. Idem, p.22