

The Development Dictionary

n. A Guide to Knowledge as Power

Second Edition

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Introduction

WOLFGANG SACHS

The last forty years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary.

Like a towering lighthouse guiding sailors towards the coast, ‘development’ stood as the idea which oriented emerging nations in their journey through post-war history. No matter whether democracies or dictatorships, the countries of the South proclaimed development as their primary aspiration, after they had been freed from colonial subordination. Four decades later, governments and citizens alike still have their eyes fixed on this light flashing just as far away as ever: every effort and every sacrifice is justified in reaching the goal, but the light keeps on receding into the dark.

The lighthouse of development was erected right after the Second World War. Following the breakdown of the European colonial powers, the United States found an opportunity to give worldwide dimensions to the mission their founding fathers had bequeathed to them: to be the ‘beacon on the hill’. They launched the idea of development with a call to every nation to follow in their footsteps. Since then, the relations between North and South have been cast in this mould: ‘development’ provided the fundamental frame of reference for that mixture of generosity, bribery and oppression which has characterized the policies toward the South. For almost half a century, good neighbourliness on the planet was conceived in the light of ‘development’.

Today, the lighthouse shows cracks and is starting to crumble. The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes, have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work. Moreover, the historical conditions which catapulted the idea into prominence have vanished: development has become outdated. But, above all, the hopes and desires which made the idea fly are now exhausted: development has grown obsolete.

Nevertheless, the ruin stands there and still dominates the scenery like a landmark. Though doubts are mounting and uneasiness is widely felt, development talk still pervades not only official declarations but even the language of grassroots movements. It is time to dismantle this mental

structure. The authors of this book consciously bid farewell to the defunct idea in order to clear our minds for fresh discoveries.

Over the years, piles of technical reports have been accumulated which show that development does not work; stacks of political studies have proven that development is unjust. The authors of this book deal neither with development as technical performance nor with development as class conflict, but with development as a particular cast of mind. For development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions. Perceptions, myths and fantasies, however, rise and fall independent of empirical results and rational conclusions; they appear and vanish, not because they are proven right or wrong, but rather because they are pregnant with promise or become irrelevant. This book offers a critical inventory of development credos, their history and implications, in order to expose in the harsh glare of sunlight their perceptual bias, their historical inadequacy, and their imaginative sterility. It calls for apostasy from the faith in development in order to liberate the imagination for bold responses to the challenges humanity is facing before the turn of the millennium.

We propose to call the age of development that particular historical period which began on 20 January 1949, when Harry S. Truman for the first time declared, in his inauguration speech, the Southern hemisphere as 'underdeveloped areas'. The label stuck and subsequently provided the cognitive base for both arrogant interventionism from the North and pathetic self-pity in the South. However, what is born at a certain point in time can die again at a later point; the age of development is on the decline because its four founding premises have been outdated by history.

First of all, it was a matter of course for Truman that the United States – along with other industrialized nations – was at the top of the social evolutionary scale. Today, this premise of superiority has been fully and finally shattered by the ecological predicament. Granted the US may still feel it is running ahead of the other countries, but it is clear now that the race is leading towards an abyss. For more than a century, technology carried the promise of redeeming the human condition from sweat, toil and tears. Today, especially in the rich countries, it is everybody's best kept secret that this hope is nothing other than a flight of fancy.

After all, with the fruits of industrialism still scarcely distributed, we now consume in one year what it took the earth a million years to store up. Furthermore, much of the glorious productivity is fed by the gigantic throughput of fossil energy; on the one side, the earth is being excavated and permanently scarred, while on the other a continuous rain of harmful substances drizzles down – or filters up into the atmosphere. If all countries

‘successfully’ followed the industrial example, five or six planets would be needed to serve as mines and waste dumps. It is thus obvious that the ‘advanced’ societies are no model; rather they are most likely to be seen in the end as an aberration in the course of history. The arrow of progress is broken and the future has lost its brightness: it holds in store more threats than promises. How can one believe in development, if the sense of orientation has withered away?

Secondly, Truman launched the idea of development in order to provide a comforting vision of a world order where the US would naturally rank first. The rising influence of the Soviet Union – the first country which had industrialized outside of capitalism – forced him to come up with a vision that would engage the loyalty of the decolonizing countries in order to sustain his struggle against communism. For over forty years, development has been a weapon in the competition between political systems. Now that the East–West confrontation has come to a halt, Truman’s project of global development is bound to lose ideological steam and to remain without political fuel. And as the world becomes polycentric, the scrapyard of history now awaits the dumping of the category ‘Third World’, a category invented by the French in the early 1950s in order to designate the embattled territory between the two superpowers.

Nevertheless, new, albeit belated, calls for development may multiply, as the East–West division gets absorbed into the rich–poor division. In this light, however, the entire project fundamentally changes its character: prevention replaces progress as the objective of development; the redistribution of risk rather than the redistribution of wealth now dominates the international agenda. Development specialists shrug their shoulders about the long-promised industrial paradise, but rush to ward off the flood of immigrants, to contain regional wars, to undercut illicit trade, and to contain environmental disasters. They are still busy identifying deficits and filling gaps, but Truman’s promise of development has been turned upside down.

Thirdly, development has changed the face of the earth, but not in the way it had intended. Truman’s project now appears as a blunder of planetary proportions. In 1960, the Northern countries were twenty times richer than the Southern, in 1980 forty-six times richer. Is it an exaggeration to say that the illusion of ‘catching up’ rivals on a world scale Montezuma’s deadly illusion of receiving Cortez with open arms? Of course, most Southern countries stepped on the gas, but the North outpaced them by far. The reason is simple: in this kind of race, the rich countries will always move faster than the rest, for they are geared towards a continuous degradation of what they have to put forth: the most advanced technology. They are world champions in competitive obsolescence.

Social polarization prevails within countries as well; the stories about falling real income, misery and desperation are all too familiar. The campaign to turn traditional man into modern man has failed. The old ways have been smashed, the new ways are not viable. People are caught in the deadlock of development: the peasant who is dependent on buying seeds, yet finds no cash to do so; the mother who benefits neither from the care of her fellow women in the community nor from the assistance of a hospital; the clerk who had made it in the city, but is now laid off as a result of cost-cutting measures. They are all like refugees who have been rejected and have no place to go. Shunned by the 'advanced' sector and cut off from the old ways, they are expatriates in their own country; they are forced to get by in the no-man's-land between tradition and modernity.

Fourthly, suspicion grows that development was a misconceived enterprise from the beginning. Indeed, it is not the failure of development which has to be feared, but its success. What would a completely developed world look like? We don't know, but most certainly it would be both boring and fraught with danger. For development cannot be separated from the idea that all peoples of the planet are moving along one single track towards some state of maturity, exemplified by the nations 'running in front'. In this view, Tuaregs, Zapotecos or Rajasthanis are not seen as living diverse and non-comparable ways of human existence, but as somehow lacking in terms of what has been achieved by the advanced countries. Consequently, catching up was declared to be their historical task. From the start, development's hidden agenda was nothing else than the Westernization of the world.

The result has been a tremendous loss of diversity. The worldwide simplification of architecture, clothing and daily objects assaults the eye; the accompanying eclipse of variegated languages, customs and gestures is already less visible; and the standardization of desires and dreams occurs deep down in the subconscious of societies. Market, state and science have been the great universalizing powers; admen, experts and educators have relentlessly expanded their reign. Of course, as in Montezuma's time, conquerors have often been warmly welcomed, only to unveil their victory. The mental space in which people dream and act is largely occupied today by Western imagery. The vast furrows of cultural monoculture left behind are, as in all monocultures, both barren and dangerous. They have eliminated the innumerable varieties of being human and have turned the world into a place deprived of adventure and surprise; the 'Other' has vanished with development. Moreover, the spreading monoculture has eroded viable alternatives to the industrial, growth-oriented society and dangerously crippled humankind's capacity to meet an increasingly different future with creative responses. The last forty years have consider-

ably impoverished the potential for cultural evolution. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that whatever potential for cultural evolution remains is there in spite of development.

Four decades after Truman's invention of underdevelopment, the historical conditions which had given rise to the developmental perspective have largely disappeared. By now development has become an amoeba-like concept, shapeless but ineradicable. Its contours are so blurred that it denotes nothing – while it spreads everywhere because it connotes the best of intentions. The term is hailed by the IMF and the Vatican alike, by revolutionaries carrying their guns as well as field experts carrying their Samsonites. Though development has no content, it does possess one function: it allows any intervention to be sanctified in the name of a higher goal. Therefore even enemies feel united under the same banner. The term creates a common ground, a ground on which right and left, elites and grassroots, fight their battles.

It is our intention, as the authors of this book, to clear out of the way this self-defeating development discourse. On the one hand, we hope to disable the development professional by tearing apart the conceptual foundations of his routines; on the other hand, we would like to challenge those involved in grassroots initiatives to clarify their perspectives by discarding the crippling development talk towards which they are now leaning. Our essays on the central concepts in the development discourse intend to expose some of the unconscious structures that set boundaries on the thinking of our epoch. We believe that any imaginative effort to conceive a post-developmental era will have to overcome these constraints.

The development discourse is made up of a web of key concepts. It is impossible to talk about development without referring to concepts such as poverty, production, the notion of the state, or equality. These concepts first rose to prominence during modern Western history and only then have they been projected on the rest of the world. Each of them crystallizes a set of tacit assumptions which reinforce the Occidental world-view. Development has so pervasively spread these assumptions that people everywhere have been caught up in a Western perception of reality. Knowledge, however, wields power by directing people's attention; it carves out and highlights a certain reality, casting into oblivion other ways of relating to the world around us. At a time when development has evidently failed as a socio-economic endeavour, it has become of paramount importance to liberate ourselves from its dominion over our minds. This book is an invitation to review the developmental model of reality and to recognize that we all wear not merely tinted, but tainted, glasses if we take part in the prevailing development discourse.

THE DEVELOPMENT DICTIONARY

To facilitate this intellectual review, each chapter will dip into the archaeology of the key concept under examination and call attention to its ethnocentric and even violent nature. The chapters identify the shifting role each concept has played in the debate on development over the last forty years. They demonstrate how each concept filters perception, highlighting certain aspects of reality while excluding others, and they show how this bias is rooted in particular civilizational attitudes adopted during the course of European history. Finally, each chapter attempts to open a window onto other, and different, ways of looking at the world and to get a glimpse of the riches and blessings which survive in non-Western cultures in spite of development. Each chapter will be of worth if, after reading it, experts and citizens alike have to blush, stutter or burst out laughing when they dare to mouth the old word.

This book, it must be said, is the fruit of friendship. Above all, it is our gift to one another. Over the years, all of us authors, in various contexts and associations, have been involved in a continuous conversation, spending days or weeks together chatting, cooking, travelling, studying and celebrating. We shared our uncertainties and championed our convictions; we lived through confusion and hit upon sudden insights; we challenged our idiosyncrasies and enjoyed inspiration. Slowly and sometimes inadvertently, a common frame of reference emerged and informed, in turn, our individual work. Deprofessionalized intellectuals, in our experience, derive life from friendship and common commitment; otherwise, how could non-academic research be sustained? In our case, this would not have been possible without the personal and intellectual magnetism of Ivan Illich, in particular, who brought a number of us together and animated our thinking throughout the years. In the fall of 1988, sitting on the porch of Barbara Duden's wooden house at State College in Pennsylvania, we drew up the plan for this book after an intense week of debate interrupted by cutting onions and uncorking bottles.

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