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Introduction

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The idea of 'development' of the world's poorer countries is contested in its meaning and, therefore, in approaches to it. This contestation has been reflected in varying approaches to the field over the period in which it has been studied, principally since the conclusion of the Second World War. Yet the idea of development is central to the processes by which countries, particularly poorer, developing and post-colonial countries, organize themselves. This book assesses the key issues that such countries are required to address as they try to work towards improving the living standards of their citizens, normatively to eliminate absolute poverty, as well as to construct a political and social environment in which such material benefit can take place.

If this book takes a particular approach to the subject, it is by trying to capture the key elements of the field in overview, identifying their main themes and some of the more normative approaches. It does not, however, try to suggest a singular approach to development, nor does it fall into the trap of the latest development 'fashion' being necessarily more valuable than those that have preceded it. Indeed, if there is one unifying theme, it is that the fundamental or underlying goals that have informed the development project – the qualitative improvement in the lives of the world's poor – have not essentially changed. How to go about achieving such improvement, however, has been proposed, questioned, challenged and re-invented. There are many answers, but no single or 'true' answer.

Origins of the 'development' paradigm

The post-Second World War period saw new states coming into being following the (often forced) withdrawal of European colonial powers from Africa, Asia and elsewhere. However, the aspirations that most former colonial states had for independence were often dashed upon the rocks of limited and, in many cases, reducing capacity. Existing poverty was not always alleviated and in many cases was, along with corruption and inter-ethnic conflict, exacerbated (e.g. see Hirschmann 1987; Cornwell 1999; Englebert 2000; Luis 2000).

Combined with Cold War competition over the spread of competing ideological influences, the governments and often the peoples of most developed or industrialized countries acknowledged that they had and continue to have some responsibility to assist these poorer countries. The intentions were to support these countries' aspiration for economic development and to assist in establishing a stable and conducive material, social and political environment.

At one level, this was a simple matter of self-interest – if people in poorer countries have more income, they have more purchasing power and can generate more international trade and, hence, greater wealth all around, what has been referred to as 'enlightened self-interest' (Evans and Grant 1989: 12). At another level, a basic humanitarian sensibility leaves many people in wealthier countries feeling that to allow poorer people to continue to stay poor is simply unjust. Further, it has become increasingly clear, were there ever any doubt about it in the past, that poverty and underdevelopment have a direct correlation to a propensity for conflict, both within and between states. For much of the late twentieth century, development assistance was seen as a way to persuade poorer countries to come into one of the two major ideological camps that dominated the Cold War era – the West and the Communist bloc. The main powers of each bloc unashamedly used development assistance to maintain the support of poorer countries in order to keep them in their 'sphere of influence'.

By the early twenty-first century, this bipolar ideological orientation had evolved, with the Soviet Union no longer existing and China assuming a greater role as a development partner, if of a very particular and often overtly self-interested type. The fear that poverty could encourage conflict, perhaps on a global scale, was given a new lease of life by the preoccupation of the US, its allies and like-minded countries, following the events of 11 September 2001. This has led to a refocusing on at least some areas of development, intended to respond to a new perceived global 'enemy' – an anti-Western confederation operating under a banner of Islamist ideology, increasingly intended to establish an Islamic caliphate across claimed Islamic states.

Beyond this, even the brief era of a unipolar world, dominated by the US as the only remaining superpower in the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the early twenty-first century, has ended. The US has engaged in two disastrous wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, and thus depleted its moral as well as its financial capital. The more limited re-engagement of the US, and its allies, in Iraq and Syria to combat the self-styled 'Islamic State' can in large part be considered as a consequence of the errors made in its involvement in, and arguably its withdrawal too soon from, Iraq (Kilcullen 2015). This entanglement by the US has been paralleled by the economic rise of China and its related 'soft power' diplomacy, and the reassertion of Russia as at least a powerful regional actor.

From the viewpoint of many of its adherents, a radicalized Islamist ideology[1] has been seen as a foil to the perceived evils of global capitalism (or Westernism – defined as Christian, democratic or materialist, or all three). And while some supporters of this form of Islam espouse a purely religious (if arguably deviant) understanding of the conflict, many are also driven by desperation, poverty, inequity and dispossession. This adds up to a deep – and in many cases well-grounded – sense of injustice, raising the question of whether enhanced development leading to greater global equity might dampen the zeal of at least the foot soldiers of the movement. The aforementioned 'enlightened self-interest', which was the principal ideological motivation of Western donors fearful of the spread of Communism in the 1950s and 1960s, might provide a similar impetus for a renewal of development assistance today, so that increased 'development' might be seen as one thread in the 'war on terror' and beyond.

The economic and strategic rise of China, closely followed by India, has more specifically shifted the world balance in trade and development. Developed countries, notably the US, are increasingly on the back foot over the rise of these two powers, having shifted its global strategic focus back towards the Pacific. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 and continues to reverberate through parts of the global economy illustrated just how fragile the global economy can be. Development suddenly seemed no longer a given, even for developed countries, while developing states were in many cases buffered by these larger forces over which they had little or no control. Many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states continued to grapple with the effects of post-industrial decline well after the global financial crisis was thought to have formally passed, with one major area of impact being, in some cases, their relatively reduced level of financial support for international aid and multilateral institutions.

The preoccupation with new competing forces and limitations upon the extent to which external actors can effect positive change has focused attention away from discussions about the meaning of 'development'. In the early post-war period, development was primarily, and often exclusively, identified with economic growth, usually measured in terms of the average income per head of population (per capita gross domestic product (GDP)). However, as discussed further throughout this volume, development has a range of meanings which, while in most cases are complementary or at least overlapping, may be quite distinct in the priority they give, for example, to economic equity, to political development and democratization, to gender, or to environmental issues. This then affects their implications for action.

Even the terminology of development has changed and is continuing to change. For example, the term 'third world', used in the early Cold War period to describe less developed countries, was coined to contrast them to the 'first world' of the West (largely corresponding to the OECD countries) and the 'second world' of the socialist bloc states (see Sauvy 1952). Although still, if more rarely, used, the term 'third world' has been effectively undermined by recognition of a 'fourth' world (indigenous peoples), the political collapse of the 'second world' and, more importantly, by its overly generic and hence indistinct meaning across a wide range of quite varied economic and political circumstances.

The whole approach to development, assumed for years to occur through a process of industrialization, which has occurred in some instances and not in others, has also been questioned. There is now a more nuanced approach to improving livelihoods, especially in societies whose capacity for industrialization is limited or, in effect, non-existent. The OECD countries, meanwhile, which 'industrialized' or 'modernized' in the nineteenth or the first half of the twentieth century, are now increasingly reliant upon service industries and higher technology rather than the heavy industrialized industries of that principally manufacturing-driven era. Some analysts suggest that the idea of 'modernism', which they see as corresponding to heavy industrialization, production lines and bureaucratic organization, has, for many countries, more or less passed with the advent of the increasingly diversified, globalized, high-technology types of work that now characterize the leading edge of developed economies. While some countries have successfully adopted industrialization, this wider change to economic organization suggests that the path to development may differ for countries now endeavouring to lift themselves out of poverty. Some may be able to 'skip' directly to a service industry, high technology approach.

Such considerations are, of course, a very long way from the commodity-producing and subsistence economies of most of the world's developing, less developed or least developed states, in which wages are low, employment conditions usually poor and unregulated, and in which many facets of modern (or postmodern) life taken for granted in OECD countries exist only as a dream. Such countries also often lack technical and organizational capacity, and have limited access to resources. There has been a trickle down of technology to developing countries, but for many people – around one in ten – clean running water is still not available, while health conditions remain poor, medical support is limited or unaffordable, literacy remains at marginal levels and opportunities for personal growth are virtually non-existent.

Varied development experiences

The notion of 'third worldism' as a formula to express the common interests and joint organization of developing countries has also been challenged and largely undermined by the increasing variety of development experiences between and within these countries themselves. Can there be said to be a common feature of countries as diverse as East Timor, Ethiopia, El Salvador and Bangladesh? Such countries are usually classified as less developed (LD) or least developed (LLD), with the latter status being used by the United Nations as a benchmark for entitlement to preferential assistance. The LLD countries, the poorest in the world, are those whose poverty is most profound, for whom special help is supposed to be available. Per capita GDP in such countries is generally less than US$2 a day and in some cases US$1 a day. What is more, for many of their inhabitants even these amounts would be regarded as a mark of wealth, as median incomes are invariably less than this. Examples of LLD countries include Laos, Cambodia, East Timor, Burma and many of the states of sub-Saharan Africa. LD countries include South Africa, Egypt, the Central American states and the Philippines.

Some countries previously regarded as 'third world' and generally classified as 'developing' have managed to rise above such levels, on account of beneficial location, natural resources (especially oil), colonial (or post-colonial) heritage and good governance, or, in more exceptional circumstances, the right mix of policies combined with a competent and honest government. The average income of their populations is considerably more than in the bottom two categories, yet they are still some way from the income levels of the OECD countries. Industrialization may be taking place, but it is not consistent, and their economies tend to continue to be dominated either by commodity exports or light or simple manufacturing, often combined with a high level of foreign investment and ownership. Thailand, Malaysia, Chile and Argentina all fall into such a category of 'developing' countries, as do China, Brazil and India, with each now rapidly industrializing and also moving into areas of higher technology.