A Critique on International Development Agenda

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Abstract

Changes in the Global South are resonant through the international development agenda. This article focuses on the post World War II (WWII) context when the idea that 'development can be fostered' got momentum and plans for conscious development initiatives started to emerge. The article examines the emergent trends in development.

The aim is to examine the changes in international development agenda in the post WWII context and simultaneously to critically evaluate the trends in such interventionist planned development initiative. Examining the international development agenda, it is argued that at different points of time, development focus was either at the macro or at the micro level; either on the government or on the market as central. Whatever be the target, whoever is in main role, little significant change that can be named 'development' is reported.

The article concludes by emphasizing the need of focus not only on economic growth but also on social and political development. The cooperation of all the stakeholders i.e. individuals, communities, NGOs and private sectors along with the government appear essential for development to happen.

Key Words

Modernisation, structural adjustment policies, human development, sustainable development, Millennium Development Goals.

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1. Introduction

At different points of time, strong arguments existed regarding the meaning of the word 'development'. The notion of 'development' or it is better to say 'the notion of conscious development' or 'the idea that development can be fostered' is relatively new. After the WWII, on 20 January 1949, the then president of the United States, Harry S. Truman, using the word 'underdeveloped', identified the problem of a huge portion of the world. He indicated the solution to be modern scientific and technical knowledge. As a result, economic development and poverty reduction in the 'underdeveloped' parts of the world became an international agenda.

2. 1950s and 60s

As decolonisation occurred between 1945 and 1962, the international agenda of developing the underdeveloped was extended to all the poorer nations of the world. The United Nations and other international organisations like, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the now World Bank), the International Monetary Fund, etc. were formed with the single focus of improving and reforming the economies. Only economic growth became the major concern of governments.

In the early 1950s, the prevailing economic development theories motivated the developed countries to turn to the underdeveloped as the major target of development. The governments of these underdeveloped interventionist states had desire to cut pre-independence colonial ties which were identified with the market mechanism; and felt the need to create infrastructure and the institutions. The functioning of these underdeveloped interventionist states as a national entity required such infrastructure and institutions. The infrastructure and institutions also complemented the functioning of the newly created non-agricultural entrepreneurs. Adhering to the import substitution industrialisation, it was important to protect these enterprises. Typically, governments thus tended to over-commit themselves by deploying a vast array of direct and indirect policy instruments to shift resources towards themselves and favoured private groups, all in the effort to promote growth. The motivation was to promote industry, with relatively less attention paid to what was viewed as a stubbornly stagnant agriculture. Generally, industrialisation was viewed as equivalent to development.

However, Escober (1995) reported what he found in one of the most influential documents of the period. Prepared by a group of experts convened by the United Nations with the objective of designing concrete policies and measures 'for the economic development of underdeveloped countries', the report mentioned:

> There is a sense in which rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst, and large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress may have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated. Very few communities are willing to pay the full price of economic progress. (United Nations, Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 1951) (p. 4).

Escober (1995) summarized saying that “the statement exemplified a growing will to transform drastically two-third of the world in the pursuit of the goal of material prosperity and economic progress” (p. 4).

Thus, the reality was that people were not benefitting equally through the interventions and were becoming frustrated; people had to pay the full price of economic progress for which, in most cases, they were not willing. At this stage, people and their choice were ignored.

With the emergence of the idea that ‘development can be fostered’ and belief in ‘development through technical modernisation’, ‘development’ was being used synonymously with economic growth. Development conceived of as economic growth is a quantitative concept and basically means more of the same (Szirmai, 2005). But, economic development is not economic growth alone. Economic development refers to growth accompanied by qualitative changes in the structure of production and employment, generally referred to as structural change (Kuznets, 1966). Such concerns were missed out as other structural changes were not considered with economic growth receiving full concentration. As a result, in many cases, interventions for material prosperity and economic progress were reported to result into development disasters due to lack of necessary analysis and consultation for acceptance by the local people (Brammer, 1996; Ericksen, Ahmad and Chowdhury, 1993; Biswas and Tortajada, 2001).

In 1960, W.W. Rostow published ‘The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto’. In this ambitious overview of economic development, he put forward a scheme of five stages which all developing countries would pass. Starting from the ‘traditional’ stage a society passes through ‘preconditions for takeoff’, economic ‘take-off’, ‘drive to maturity’ and finally reaches the ‘age of high mass consumption’. Rostow and other modernisation theorists saw development as the ‘process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems’ created in Europe and the USA from the 17th century, (Eisenstadt, 1966) that they believed to be essential to elevate living standards with more goods and services to an expanding population. He emphasised that such development can take place only in a capitalist context and the shift is essentially from agricultural to industrial societies with service focused economies. Donors as well as the elites of most newly independent countries were committed to an almost missionary task, namely development through technical modernisation (Simon, 2000). While economic growth was evident for many countries through increase in Gross National Product (GNP), little 'trickle-down' process was happening; the gap between the rich and the poor was growing; even the gap between the first world and the third world was also growing rapidly.

Issues concerning social and institutional improvement existed in theory and policy but in a very small scale. Consequently, in the 1960s, this conception of economic growth came under growing criticism. Many authors such as Dudley Seers, Gunnar Myrdal, Paul Streeten, Hollis Chenery, Mahbub ul Haq and institutions like International Labour Organization (ILO) pointed out that despite the impressive growth records in the post-WWII period developing countries, much changes had not occurred in the living conditions of the masses of the poor (Szirmai, 2005; Chenery *et al.*, 1974; ILO, 1976; Myrdal, 1971; Seers, 1979; Streeten, 1972; ul Haq, 1976). The conclusion drawn was that development involves more than economic growth and changes in economic structures (Szirmai, 2005).

1960s is the era of 'Green Revolution'. The belief was, 'technology improves farming'. The goal was to plant better crops to wipe out world hunger. Although a few large commercial farmers benefitted by the 'Green Revolution' programmes, the fate of the marginalized peasants remained unchanged and in specific cases deteriorated.
The international development agenda of 1950s was at the national level and in 60s continued to be at the national and sub-national level.

3. 1970s

A turn in focus in international development agenda occurred through what the then President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, said in 1972. He asserted that the governments in developing countries must redesign policies to meet the needs of the poorest 40 per cent of their people - and relieve their poverty directly. The new direction in development strategy was thus to deal with poverty directly causing no damage to economic prospects. Hence the slogan had been: 'redistribution with growth'. In the late 1970's a focus on basic needs was advocated by Paul Streeten, Mahbub Ul Haq, Amartya Sen and others. Their advocacy for education, nutrition, health, sanitation, and employment for the poor, reflected an acknowledgment that the benefits of development did not necessarily 'trickle down' to the deprived (Harris, 2000). With the other major slogan of 70s- 'meeting basic needs', education was the main focus and actions were concentrated on promoting education.

Instead of indirectly helping the poor through macro-level top-down policies, new policies were formulated to directly addressing the needs of the poorest in the society and 'meeting basic needs'. The advocates of ‘basic needs’, called for greater attention to smaller- scale activities and poorer sectors of society along with continued investment in large-scale infrastructure.

As reported in ‘The UN and Development Policies’ (UN Intellectual History Project, 2010)-

> The macroeconomic strategy to meet basic needs included two essential elements: an employment strategy to enable all families to generate sufficient income to meet the family’s basic needs—in cash or kind, through rural or urban home production, or through employment in the informal or formal sector. The second element of this macro-strategy was redistribution with growth. An acceleration of economic growth was required, but it was recognized that growth alone would not be sufficient to meet basic needs within a generation. Thus an element of redistribution was required, not by any simple “taking from the rich and giving to the poor” but by concentrating increases in production and income and growth on those parts of an economy with disproportionate numbers of poor people. Such a strategy would enable the incomes of the poor to grow faster than the incomes of the rich.

In reality, oil prices hike in 1973–4 and again in 1978–9, inability of the developing countries to repay debt, fall in commodity price that led to reduced export earning, global recession, increased import tariffs imposed by the industrialised countries, high interest rate led to moving of savings to safer countries, etc. contributed to ‘debt crisis’. Consequently, employment, basic needs, and much else was pushed to the sidelines with the debt crisis. Actions to tackle national deficits and debt took center stage and the widespread support for basic needs twisted.

The basic needs approach in the international development agenda was the first attempt that looked at a micro level along with macro policies.

4. 1980s

With a shift in focus to ‘structural adjustment’, experience of 1980's also included liberalisation of trade, eliminating government deficits and overvalued exchange rates, and dismantling inefficient parasitical organisations. International institutions imposed liberal development policies to the Third World countries during the post-WWII period. Between 1970s and 1980s, those proved to be wrong. Many countries were found to have chronic payment problem that indicated that those countries were fallen into economic crisis. The institutions, such as, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which imposed liberal development policies earlier came up with the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) to address the then economic crisis in several African, Latin

American, Caribbean and Asian countries between 1980s and 1990s. On one hand, SAPs required poor countries to reduce spending on things like health, education and development, on the other hand, debt repayment and other economic policies were prioritized. In effect, the IMF and World Bank have demanded that poor nations lower the standard of living of their people.

The significant focus in development was then shifted to Sustainable Development (SD). Concern about environment was not new. Environmentalists in the late 1960s and 1970s argued that exponential growth could not be sustained without seriously depleting the planet's resources and overloading its ability to deal with pollution and waste materials (Beder, 2005). For environmental problems industries, Western culture, economic growth and technology were blamed. Even at that time, the environmentalists questioned Western paradigms and strongly criticized inequitable distribution of wealth and resource use. Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' (1962), Paul Ehrlich's 'The Population Bomb' (1968), and Donella Meadows's 'The Limits to Growth' (1972) showed the serious harmful effects of accelerating industrial growth and the chemical-dependent agriculture of the green revolution. By questioning the very possibility of progress, environmentalism then undercut the rationale and methods of development (Cullather, 2002).

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and UNEP in the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN-UNEP-WWF, 1980) defined SD as the "maintenance of essential ecological processes and life support systems, the preservation of genetic diversity, and the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems".
Allen (1980) summarized the World Conservation Strategy and suggested that SD is "development that is likely to achieve lasting satisfaction of human needs and improvement of the quality of human life" (p. 23).

In 1983, the United Nations assigned a commission on environment and development under Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland to reconcile the objectives of environmental health and economic growth. The Brundtland Report, 'Our Common Future' (United Nations, 1987), issued in April 1987, popularized the term SD.
Brundtland defined SD as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987).
Subsequent elaborations and analyses have converted the simple Brundtland concept into a sophisticated system with three pillars – one each for the economic, environmental, and social aspects of SD (Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1989; World Bank, 1992, 2003)[1].

[1] Sustainable Development: The Road towards the 2007 Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-15). Retrieved on 16.02.10.

5. 1990s

In 1992, leaders at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (unofficially known as the 'Earth Summit') (United Nations, 2007), built upon the framework of Brundtland Report to create agreements and conventions on critical issues, such as climate change, desertification and deforestation[2]. Agenda 21; the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity were adopted by more than 178 Governments at the Conference (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 to 14 June 1992[3].

Built on ideas from the Stockholm Declaration, with a vision to guide future SD around the world, 'The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development' offered 27 principles. These principles defined the rights of people to development along with their responsibilities to protect the common environment. The Rio Declaration states that the only way to have long term economic progress is to link it with environmental protection.

Throughout the 1990s, all the governments who adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development worked for their promises, and regional and sectoral sustainability plans were developed.

A wide variety of groups—ranging from businesses to municipal governments to international organisations such as the World Bank—adopted the SD concept and gave it their own particular interpretations[4]. These interpretations have increased our understanding of SD within many different contexts.

The reality was such that, despite decades of 'development'/ development interventions, poverty in the South continued to increase. Existing development approaches offered elegant models, but they were not working, not bringing the expected outcomes.

For Sachs (1992),

> 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.

Hanmer and others (1997) identified persistent poverty and inequality even within economic affluence to be the most problematic issue of today's development.

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http://www.iaea.org/About/Policy/GC/GC51/GC51InfDocuments/English/gc51inf-3-att6_en.pdf

[2] Introduction to Sustainable Development. Retrieved on 06.04.09. http://sustainus.org/docs/SD.Gateway.Presentation.pdf

[3] Sustainable Development Conventions and Treaties. Retrieved on 23.01.10. http://ces.iisc.ernet.in/hpg/envis/sdev/conv.htm

[4] United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Training module, Introduction to Capacity Building for Environment, Trade and Sustainable Development. Retrieved on 06.07.09. http://www.unep.ch/etb/publications/capacityBuilding/TrainingModule148.pdf

6. Millennium

Alternative paths[5] were urgently needed, with this understanding, at the beginning of the twenty-first century there was general agreement, at the global as well as national level, that poverty is unacceptable as part of the human condition (Naseem, 2002[6]). Thus, globally it has been recognized that the coexistence of pervasive poverty, with the affluence of a much smaller segment of the population, is ethically unacceptable, economically inefficient, and politically unsustainable. With this reality of inequality and the unacceptability of it, the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed upon at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 by 190 countries. It is adopted as a framework for the development activities. However, the reality about the half a century development practices is asserted by Wills (2006)-

> While there have clearly been successes, the fact remains that the Millennium Development Goals are a reflection of the relative failure of development practices to provide even the most basic levels of food, shelter, healthcare and education for millions of the world's people.

7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the international development agenda with their critiques that were dominated in the post WWII scenario till date with a aim to develop the underdeveloped.

The need to extend critical perspectives to all the elements of the new development agenda is the priority of the time. At different points of time, development goals had either been set at the macro level or at the micro level. Again, at different stages, either the government or the market had been found to play the main role in development. However, an effective development agenda that essentially needs to focus not only on economic growth but also on social and political development, must consider working at both macro and micro level simultaneously. Again, the cooperation of all the stakeholders i.e. individuals, communities, NGOs and private sectors along with the government appear essential for development to happen. As the closing year of MDGs is approaching, there is no alternative to reflecting on the past experiences and adopting the good practices to identify the Post-2015 Challenges.

[5] SD Gateway. Retrieved on 29.1.09. http://sdgateway.net/livelihoods/introduction.htm

[6] Rural development and poverty in South Asia. 2002. Retrieved on 29.1.09. http://www.unescap.org/pdd/publications/dp23/chapter_1.pdf

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