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DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: CRITIQUE AND RENEWAL

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**DEVELOPMENT RECONSIDERED:  
THE HUMAN DIMENSION**

This is a particularly gratifying occasion for me because so much common philosophy is shared by the Institute of Social Studies, which over the last three decades has played a central role in the Netherlands in providing useful training and intellectual guidance to Third World development scholars and planners, and my own institution, the United Nations University. We are both internationally oriented and committed to the advancement of knowledge through scholarly collaboration. Like you, we believe that the solution to the urgent, complex and intimately interlinked problems of the modern world requires the perspectives of many disciplines working in cooperation to stimulate a dynamic interplay of insight and experience.

We also share with the Institute of Social Studies a concern with fashioning more penetrating, more comprehensive and workable analytical tools to improve understanding of the development process, a process that is taking place in, and is profoundly affected by as much as it affects, a swiftly-changing world which is hardly recognizable from the perspective that obtained when so much of modern development theory first took shape.

In pursuit of that goal we seek, as you do, to work on the outer limits of social and scientific theory. At the same time we are also concerned with the natural sciences and technologies as they affect poverty, growth, employment and justice — domestically, regionally and globally. Our concern is consequently not limited to the cutting edge of western social science theory; we also endeavour to bring to this very challenging work new and innovative thinking which represents a variety of non-western cultures and experiences.

As the United Nations University, we stand at the crossroads of the world's international organizations and the world's scholars. We believe this enables us to provide service to, and to draw insight from, both the UN community and the academic community. We try to help the differing approaches characteristic of the two communities to converge to mutual benefit. One reflects the immediate realities of day-to-day affairs; the other the longer and more detached view from the scholar's study, in the field as well as at his own institution.



One of the most important and useful things that these last three decades should have taught us about attempts to evaluate or re-examine development efforts is how meaningless the usual social and cultural indicators can be. They chiefly measure external manifestations, and the manner of reading these measurements has often been adapted to the particular intellectual needs or heritage of the outside observer. Thirty years of misunderstanding arising from such readings should underscore the importance of also including the interior view of the behaviour of a nation — one that is better equipped to recognize and take into account the deep-rooted internal cultural dynamics which shape a society's forces for change and for continuity, and have proven so much more powerful than had been expected.

This, of course, raises the question of the validity of the external versus the internal view — which is the central issue of the debate now raging in various parts of academia over the merits and demerits of Orientalism, with the latter often attributed to a subconscious desire for political and cultural domination. While I recognize very well the roots from which such criticism stems, and understand and sympathize with some of its motivations, I do believe that on balance the external view can serve a potentially creative function.

Perhaps it helps to clarify matters if one puts the issues as a matter of two opposite mirrors. One reflects the picture that a people or society have of themselves, as shaped by their own history, their own myths and their own goals and aspirations; the other shows the image perceived by the outside world. Both mirrors will be inherently flawed, although each in different ways. Equally important to a true understanding of what they show is the question of who is holding the mirrors and the various angles and biases which may reflect the holder as much as the viewer. What is most important, however, is that there be constructive interaction between the internal view, rooted in the deep structure of culture, and the exterior views, based on other perceptions, values and interests. Often these different mirrors can correct each other and sharpen perceptions of truth or, more precisely, of the relational objectivity of the different perceptions of reality. Honest and well-grounded interaction between interior and exterior views can give rise to deeper inter-cultural understanding as well as to a sense of global human solidarity, transcending traditional tribal, ethnic, religious or ideological perceptions and loyalties.

For this dynamic process to be truly meaningful, however, there must exist internally the critical capacity to evaluate the exterior views. This underlines the need for the social sciences in the Third World to become more capable of a vigorous but dispassionate and critical assessment of

exterior views in both the national and international contexts. Such a capacity is necessary to reduce the inevitable distortions that creep in — particularly when work in a developing country, as is often the case, is funded by exterior sources. In such instances, the donor's priorities almost certainly become reflected, together with his value systems, his national perspectives and interests, or simply the prevailing winds of Western intellectual fashion. As we have found out all too well in thirty years of development experience, these are not always synonymous with the needs or the perceptions of the recipient.

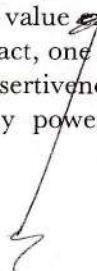
Perhaps the most relevant truth that has emerged from the last thirty years is that development, defined as the endeavour towards a managed transformation of society, has been important, but only one among many factors that have determined the present state of the human condition. We cannot in good conscience attempt to reconsider development without taking into account the overall historical setting of war, revolution and social and political upheaval which has characterized the past three decades, and within which the development effort has taken place.

We should realize that in the Third World alone there have been more than one hundred wars since the end of World War II. Apart from outright war, many Third World societies have been rent by serious domestic conflicts along, but also across class, ethnic, religious or ideological lines of division, resulting both from the destabilizing impact of development and from the absence of development.

In the process we have witnessed the complete polarization of societies and the mindless escalation of sometimes blind and sometimes calculated violence, the collapse of political institutions or political systems, and even the wholesale destruction of the social fabric of a society. We have also seen processes emerge that have led more generally to the militarization of many societies. The rapid rise in arms purchases is only one manifestation of this.

In all cases the human, social and cultural cost has been tremendous. In part all this has been the result of processes of change, in the initiation of which governments may have played some role, but in the subsequent evolution of which they have had little control. These almost autonomous processes have to do with population increase and the resultant pressure on resources and employment, along with the growing access to information through education, communication and exposure, directly or vicariously, to other life-styles which has led to higher expectations, profound value exchanges and higher levels of political consciousness.

In fact, one major feature of these recent decades has been the growing self-assertiveness in almost all parts of the developing world of the traditionally powerless, and of those marginalized by development and





modernization, and their political awakening. It is no exaggeration to say that, in many different ways, the little people are now on the move. In some cases they have simply moved up the economic development ladder, although in some cases, their rise has been accompanied by conflict and met with violence. But their heightened expectations and their refusal to continue to accept their lot has also led to massive population movements involving urbanization and migration within and across national boundaries and even across continental divides.

We are now living in a world whose peoples are on the move, on a scale unprecedented in time and scope. In Asia alone, accepting only the more conservative estimates of internal and international migrants in recent years, some fifty million people are involved. We have there a veritable 'nation of migrants' with a population larger than all but six Asian countries. Around the world, upwards of sixteen million refugees of war, oppression and natural disaster are adrift. An additional twenty million workers, by some estimates, are in jobs outside their home countries. In the face of the immense magnitude of these often violent social, political and historical convulsions, and the unbelievable scale of human suffering, despair and rage — along with heightened religious intensity — the development planners and practitioners often stand powerless and speechless in the realization that the development effort to which they are committed is one and only one of the many interacting forces of change of such unsuspected power in society.

Gone are the early certitudes and naïve illusions about development as an endeavour in social engineering towards a brave new world. Multiple goals have replaced the initial single focus. There is now a greater understanding for the profound interaction between international and national factors and their inseparability in the development process to the point where it almost becomes impossible to view that process only in the context of the nation-state. There is also an increasing emphasis on people, on human beings and the human potential as the basis, the means and the ultimate purpose of the development effort. The true human dimension of development in all its complexities is moving to the fore, and most of us have become more humble in facing it.

To focus the development effect more effectively on the betterment of the lot of individual human beings, we certainly need to be more realistic about what it is that we have been able to accomplish thus far — and where it is we have failed. I do not believe we can get there if we continue to rely on the conventional cultural and social indicators and continue to look at the social sciences merely in an instrumentalist fashion, for they do not lead us to what I sense to be the central problems in this area.

To illustrate, the tremendous increase in school enrolment in the Third

World should of course be entered in the ledger against the growth in absolute numbers of illiterates the world over. What is however equally significant — and here we move off the balance sheet — is that these figures of educational expansion tell little about the long-term impact of the kind of educational experience provided on those millions of Third World children. The statistics do not tell us how well their education prepares them for their situations, or the degree to which, because of its generally urban bias, modern education has contributed to the cultural impoverishment, cultural discontinuities and alienation in the countryside, and to the present anomic behaviour of so many of the young. Likewise, in many places the considerable proliferation of cultural facilities in rural as well as urban areas has apparently not had any significant effect on reducing the pressures towards urbanization.

Weighing the largest number of women in the registered labour force in urban areas against the loss of income for women in the countryside as a result of the modernization of agriculture, does not say much about the degree and structure of exploitation, deprivation and despair of those women.

Similarly, with some notable exceptions, the expansion of higher education has not led to the significant scientific or technological innovations which could lead the way to a more autonomous trajectory of development and industrialization. This may in part have to do with the lack of interest of economic planners in the development of basic science capabilities in their countries, perhaps also with too instrumentalist a view of knowledge and culture. But it also has to do with lack of interest or even hostility on the part of the political leadership to providing the political space — the essential precondition — for the flowering of science, experimentation, critical judgement, innovation, or simply for new ideas and synthesis: i.e. academic freedom.

To give just one more illustration. In many countries that have opted for a national language rather than for that of their former colonizer, efforts to make modern science more accessible and capable of taking root in the intellectual mainstream through a massive translation programme and through developing the national language into a vehicle of scientific communication, have been very inadequate. More surprising but equally disturbing has been the fact that neither the 'basic needs' nor the 'development from below' concepts have drawn the implications for the use and development of minority languages as vehicles for such a development dynamics, and for the expression of social and technological creativity at the local level. These neglected issues, of course, open a Pandora's Box of questions that have to do with the capacity of a society continuously to adjust the sensitive balance between the requirements for na-



tional unity and the fuller and more equitable involvement of minorities in national life and in the development process, as active participants in the decision-making process as well as beneficiaries of development. And finally, in many languages the hierarchy of terms of address and other such factors have been a major instrument in the perpetuation of the inferior status of women and should have received much greater attention in language development policies.

Questions like changes in the position of women, ambivalent at best for those in the middle class and definitely negative for those among the urban and rural poor, or changes in attitudes towards work and gainful employment; but also questions like the impact of family planning on the family and on attitudes in some cultures towards female babies born to already large families; on dietary habits and notions about health, all affecting traditional concepts of family life, should no longer be weighed in isolation. They should be considered together with the traumatic impact of massive migration and urbanization on family life, on concepts of family, and on the large number of single heads of households who have to cope with old as well as new problems.

In drawing up a balance sheet on human rights, the easy way, which too many have taken, would be to list countries on a scale of so-called human rights performance. It is, of course, of the utmost importance to establish a floor below which violations of human rights will invite international expressions of opprobrium or sanctions. Still, we should also realize that violations of human rights are quite often manifestations of failure to manage the drive for economic growth together with the structural changes necessary to broaden the social base of the development process, and to come to grips with the causes of endemic poverty. Many among the countries that sit in self-righteous judgement cannot and should not avoid sharing the responsibility for these terrible events by failing to help develop more effective and comprehensive theories for the democratic management of structural transformation in development. In fact, after the collapse of the first generation of political institutions patterned after Western models of democratic government, many major institutions of higher learning in the First World, the *Alma Maters* of many Third World leaders and developers, seem to have lost interest in the search for development theories that could reconcile the often conflicting requirements of freedom and governance, leaving many of us in the Third World with a keen sense of abandonment. In truth, no balance sheet can in any way reflect the bitter fact that after the attainment of national independence, many of our countries have lost their freedom, leaving us with the gnawing suspicion that our own patterns of development may have contributed to that loss.

And what is there to be said when, for ideological reasons or for political or economic convenience, governments have started to expel their minorities on a massive scale or to export their labourers without assuming responsibility for their conditions of work in the receiving countries? At the same time, what is there to be said about those other governments, often signatories to the Helsinki Agreements stating the right to leave one's country, which are engaged in efforts to keep many unfortunate people bottled up in their own countries which they want to leave because of untenable conditions? Such are some of the ironies and perplexities of the human and cultural dimensions of the development experience.

Thirty years of development experience seem to suggest then that beyond the conventional cultural policies and related cultural and social indicators are a host of insufficiently explored cultural factors. These factors bear on a society's response to modernization; on the often alternating choices between isolation and openness; on a society's capacity to maintain national and social solidarity and cohesiveness in the face of major social, cultural and structural changes that upset sensitive traditional social and political equilibria; and on a society's need to see its evolution and its capacity to incorporate innovation, science and technology in ways that are in consonance with its own sense of moral purpose.

Our concern with the human and social dimensions of development should therefore pay far more attention to its interaction with the massive and powerful and almost autonomous dynamics of social change at the national and international levels, but also to the pervasive influence of traditional notions of power and meaning on development and on the concept of the state, its role and its transformation in the development effort. Our basic failure to reach the poor, to come to grips with poverty and with the dualistic economy, seem to suggest that the persistently low priority accorded to the countryside in development planning and implementation, the persistent bias in favour of the centre and the urban areas, and the fact that so-called modern political and developmental institutions often become merely new bottles for the old wine of traditional power relations, are not only functions of the dominant interests of the elite but have also to do with the centrality and pervasiveness of the traditional political culture, traditional concepts of power, statehood, social order and hierarchy.

These concepts determine the perceived propriety of relations between the governing and the governed, between men and women, between state and society. They explain a great deal about the difficulties involved in turning an essentially law-and-order and tax-collecting colonial



bureaucracy, paternalistic at best, exploitative at worst, into a developmental, public service, emancipatory type of bureaucracy. Modern training in development administration with its emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness has unwillingly tended to strengthen deeply-rooted colonial and pre-colonial patrimonial notions about the official's relationship to the public, and has strengthened the disinclination to accept the legitimacy and importance of people's participation, self-management and self-reliance as essential vehicles for development.

The simple question of assessing the accomplishments and neglects of thirty years of development experiences has led us far afield. It has become clear, I hope, that such an assessment only makes sense if conducted in the context of the major convulsions that have marked this period. It should also have become obvious that simply drawing-up a balance sheet of achievements and failures of cultural development policies may have only limited usefulness and does not significantly add to our understanding of the dynamics of macro-social and cultural change or to the formulation of more meaningful concepts of development. That will require, firstly, a clearer understanding of the setting of the almost autonomous processes of social-cultural change within which the development effort in the narrow sense is made and with which it interacts; secondly, of the interaction, complex and large-scale, between the national development effort and a rapidly changing international environment; and thirdly, of the impact of the strength and pervasiveness of cultural tradition on the institutions and processes of modernization.

This realization takes us way beyond the notion of development as an endeavour in social engineering towards an enquiry into the dynamics of the historical processes; societal transformation in different cultures caused by alternating waves of self-chosen isolation and openness; into the possibility of growing dysfunctionality and irrelevance of cultures, or their capacity to adjust while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity through a growing endogenous capacity for cultural reinterpretation, redefinition and self-renewal.

This brings us to the middle of the ongoing global debate about the eternal tension between, and mutual interpenetration of, modernity and tradition; about the 'end of modernity' and 'the return of the sacred'; about secular and transcendental conceptions of life, and the place of science and technology in them.

Against this background the assessment in its broadest terms of the human and cultural dimensions of the development experience so far, assumes an added significance in that it may provide pointers to the larger question. That is, out of the present turmoil in the world, through

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different trajectories of development and industrialization dictated by an unprecedented combination of demographic pressures, poverty and high energy costs, may there not in a number of poor, large and populous countries in the longer term arise a variety of non-western modern civilizations side by side with that of the West, in a condition of rough parity with it but rooted in Islamic, Confucian, Hindu and other cultures, in a culturally pluralistic, more equitable and peaceful international order.

One final point needs to be made. The success and failures of thirty years of development experience have shown us that the organized pursuit of material improvements does not automatically bring freedom, human dignity, justice and civility in its wake. In fact, these values have often fallen victim to the development endeavour, even when the provision of basic services includes access to education and legal protection.

We should not forget that a zoo is a place in which the basic needs of its inhabitants are met.

Unless freedom, human rights, equity for women, respect for the rights of children, and the right freely to organize, for the rich and powerful as well as for the poor and the weak, are made independent goals of the development effort together with explicit strategies for democratic structural change that will enable people to liberate themselves from the oppressive social structures which perpetuate their dependency and powerlessness, there is little hope for growth of the cultural goods and values that make up a humane society. It is only such societies that have the resilience and the capacity for autonomous creativity and innovation and for the continuous redefinition and renewal that is essential to their survival in a crowded, competitive and rapidly changing world. Such qualities flow from the pride, the sense of identity, and ultimate faithfulness to the sense of moral purpose and meaning which are embedded in the deep structure of a society's culture.

One of the major problems at the heart of the development process is how to keep the inevitable disparities within the ethical or ideological bounds that prevail within a given culture. Failure to include these values as goals and guidelines in the development effort co-equal with economic growth, would cause such disparities to become unmanageable and would make it impossible to deal with the sense of powerlessness and moral outrage that has fuelled the revolutions, the violent convulsions, and the cultural and religious backlash of the power and intensity that we have witnessed during the last thirty years.

It is therefore not enough to assess the effectiveness, or lack of it, of cultural policies that are designed to 'overcome' so-called cultural obstacles to development, or to meet the requirements for economic



growth. It is the flowering of these intangible but essential assets that need the deliberate creation of the political space and the underlying social structures which together constitute the human and cultural conditions within which societal growth takes place, which constantly has to be monitored and addressed. And this takes us beyond the conventional social and cultural indicators that we associate with the so-called 'quality of life'.

The same holds true for international development. With growing interdependence it is no longer possible for any nation to safeguard its security, to secure its national interests and to pursue its development goals in isolation. The control of the destructive capacity of nations which threatens all of us, the persistence of large-scale hunger and poverty which degrades poor and rich alike and denies the humanity of each and all of us, the resort to random and systematic violence that brutalizes whole societies, and the violation of human rights, however defined, resulting from the incapacity to deal with poverty, equity and justice, have become common concerns and responsibilities, even though each of us may respond differently.

The common survival of humanity on this limited earth, in an international system in which no single nation or group of nations is in control but which is also affected by a general sense of uncertainty and limitations, by despair and even rage of millions of people, but also by new hope rooted in passionately held moral and religious convictions, will require unprecedented levels of mutual understanding and tolerance and much higher levels of international and people-to-people cooperation than ever before.

Our groping for the capabilities and instrumentalities to achieve this reflects the stages of our learning to see and treat the human race, in all its diversity, as a single unit of civilized life of which we all form indispensable parts.

Interdependence, however asymmetrical, forces us to see our own problems of survival and development also in global terms, and to search for local and global solutions that will be mutually compatible.

The first steps in that learning process have already been taken. The World Bank's annual report on international development and other reports help us to monitor both progress and regression in these areas; to identify problems that need to be addressed, and to suggest ways of dealing with them.

What is missing is a humanistic assessment of these data, and an evaluation or interpretation of their implications for the human and cultural dimensions of the development of each of our societies and of humankind and its succeeding generations as a whole.

It would help us to determine whether and to what extent we are on the road to self-destruction, to the peaceful antlike society of 1984, or to a more viable humane diverse and dynamic global community. It would also help to measure ourselves as human beings, against the values by which we define our cultural identity, in the value configurations specific to each nation, in making the difficult choices and trade-offs in our responses to intractable old problems and to the new challenges of a world in a process of rapid but profound transformation. Such an assessment would force each of us to ponder the implications for the meaning of life, individually and collectively.

Collectively, such periodic assessments would make explicit the various interpretations that emerge from different schools of thought and different cultural and ideological perspectives, which in turn could lead to the kind of communications on which mutual understanding, human solidarity and mutual tolerance on a global scale could be built. Such periodic reports would then contribute to the learning process towards perceiving and treating the world and humankind in all its diversity as a single entity. They would help us to monitor the progress, or lack of it, in preparing ourselves for living peacefully, civilly and humanely in a world of eight billion people, with the necessary social, artistic, cultural and managerial arrangements towards that end.

The United Nations University is at present exploring the desirability and feasibility of such a periodic, possibly annual, report on the *State of the Human Condition*. I hope that you will find this idea of sufficient interest and importance to give us your advice, support and eventually participation.



AMARTYA SEN

## DEVELOPMENT: WHICH WAY NOW?

### I. THE PROMISE AND THE DEFAULT

'Development economics is a comparatively young area of inquiry. It was born just about a generation ago, as a subdiscipline of economics, with a number of other social sciences looking on both skeptically and jealously from a distance' (Hirschman 1981: Essay 1). But the essay that Hirschman begins so cheerfully turns out to be really an obituary of development economics — no longer the envy of the other social sciences. In this illuminating essay, aptly called 'The Rise and Decline of Development Economics', Hirschman puts his main thesis thus: our subdiscipline had achieved its considerable lustre and excitement through the implicit idea that it could slay the dragon of backwardness virtually by itself or, at least, that its contribution to this task was central. We now know that this is not so (Ibidem: 23). The would-be dragon slayer seems to have stumbled on his own sword.

There is some plausibility in this diagnosis, but is it really true that development economics has no central role to play in the conquest of underdevelopment and economic backwardness? More specifically, were the original themes in terms of which the subject was launched really so far from being true or useful? I shall argue that the obituary may be premature, the original themes — while severely incomplete in coverage — did not point entirely in the wrong direction, and the discipline of development economics does have a central role to play in the field of economic growth in developing countries. But I shall also argue that the problematique underlying the approach of traditional development economics is, in some important ways, quite limited and has not — and could not have — taken us to an adequate understanding of economic development. Later on, I shall take up the question as to the direction in which we might try to go instead.

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An earlier version of this paper which appears in *The Economic Journal*, 93 (1983), was given as the Presidential Address of the Development Studies Association of the United Kingdom and Ireland in Dublin on 23 September 1982. In preparing the final version I have benefited from the comments of Carl Riskin, Louis Emmerij, Albert Hirschman, Hans Singer, the editorial referees of *The Economic Journal* and from discussions following the DSA and ISS addresses.