Development

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In the last sixty years, few words have been as intensely discussed, glorified or attacked as ‘development’. At the end of the Second World War, the word came to symbolize the hopes of almost every human being dreaming of a future liberated from colonialism, hunger, destitution, exploitation and all other forms of injustice and suffering. Today, for the billions who shared these hopes, the dream has become a nightmare. The increase in the world’s productive capacity has made it possible, indeed, to provide enough food for nine billion people, that is one and a half times the entire population of the earth; yet more than one billion are today suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

Many questions therefore arise. Is development what its votaries say it is? Does it still represent the hopes of ‘change’ and liberation that the word carried with it in its infancy? Or is it now only a mask and a modern Trojan horse, one that paradoxically serves the same old colonial or hegemonistic interests that the development discourse was meant to combat? Finally, if that discourse is no longer trusted by the populations concerned, what other prospects are open to the millions of people whose lives and livelihoods are more than ever threatened by so-called economic development?

The Story of a Corrupted Word

To deal seriously with these questions is not an easy task, for development has become an ‘amoeba’ word. It means everything
and nothing. It has different meanings in different places and contexts. For many people in the North, it still refers sometimes to a child’s mental or physical development, sometimes to the development of a game, a plot or a strategy, sometimes to a housing project. For Webster’s dictionary, to develop has also meant ‘to unfold gradually like a flower from a bud’.

Trying to convey similar messages of an ‘unfolding’ effect, modern promoters of the word have tried to use it as a substitute for such concepts as ābādi (in Persian, a clement place to live), or īmrān (the word, often used by Ibn Khadūn, that comes from the Arabic root īmr, meaning to fulfil a life, to dwell in a place, to cultivate land, to make it prosperous), or fidnāa (an Ethiopian Borana concept signifying the flow of life as it moves ahead through times and generations; a fertile environment coupled with the absence of conflict, dissatisfaction, hunger and disease). In short, it was introduced in the languages of the older civilizations with a view to co-opting all forms of endogenous processes of improvement in the ways communities were historically coping with necessity.

As such, in the new language of modern economics and of national or international institutions, the word is generally used instead of ‘growth and change’, particularly in projects aimed at modernizing life and dealing with such ‘problems’ as ‘poverty eradication’, fighting ‘underdevelopment’, malnutrition, homelessness, disease, ignorance and socio-economic inequalities.

Thus, modernized elites in ‘underdeveloped countries’ take pride in presenting themselves as champions of national development. Their enthusiasm is, however, no longer shared by their ‘target populations’, even if they had initially welcomed the concept as an answer to colonialism or foreign domination. As it stands, the concept either means nothing to them or it is perceived as a legitimizing cover for a host of totally different phenomena, namely, policies associated with new and more sophisticated forms of domination, of the compromise and destruction of the people’s own power and economy, and of the selling out of their countries to the new masters of the world market.
The main reason for this disenchantment is that the banner of development has had, particularly in the last six decades, a substantial role in uprooting entire populations in the South and in forcing them to participate in the destruction of their own livelihood. Huge masses of people have thus been led to migrating into shantytowns and transformed into modernized poor, whose tiny incomes never allow them to meet their socially generated needs. Almost everywhere, development is now identified with governments that mainly serve the interests of the ‘developed world’. Paradoxically, the word has now come to legitimate oppression at the national level, the law of the jungle, the destruction of people’s immune system, the selling out of their resources and talents to the best buyer; in short, it means the opposite of everything that once represented the liberating promises of the development discourse.

Had Webster’s dictionary to be re-edited to take into account these trends, the updated definition of the word could be something of the sort: ‘To develop is to unfold a modern process of mutation, similar to that used by corporations specialized in genetic engineering, where the latest devices of modern management, technology and economy are used to genetically modify the buds of different botanical species with a view to making them produce the one and only flowers or fruits that are more profitable on the world market.’

**Why Is Development Still a Seductive Word?**

The question is often asked: How is it possible that only a few years ago, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, the representatives of all its member states still unanimously confirmed their unconditional support of the concept, pleading for a universal commitment to the development objectives?

The answers to this question may be found in at least two sets of reasons. The first can be related to the highly manipulative uses of the word ‘underdevelopment’. In less than a century, the promoters of modern economy have succeeded in introducing, in
almost all the world’s languages, this totally new construct as a substitute for all forms of human deprivations and of shameful and degrading conditions born out of pre-economic times. Thus, in a global environment dominated by the modern binary mode of thinking, ‘development’ is proposed as the undisputed and only answer to the miseries of the past. In other words, the overpowering message to all the wretched of the earth is that they are now given, for the first time in their history, the unique chance to choose ‘freely’ between their status quo and the promises of an ideal life embodied in the concept of development.

The other set of reasons is related to modern forms of knowledge and power. Development supporters are thus composed of two main categories of persons. The first group often includes even well-intentioned persons who sincerely believe in linear ‘progress’, whose model is biological. This group is convinced that, regardless of their cultural specificities, societies, too, evolve like species or children. They go through stages of development that tend to move them forward, towards an achieved state, embodied by modern industrialized countries. With a few exceptions, the belief in such a linear progress, embodied in the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, has dominated the thinking of the world’s ‘educated elites’ for nearly two centuries.

The second category of development votaries is composed of individuals and institutions for whom development has become a major instrument of livelihood and power. Autocratic and repressive nation states in need of legitimation; economic institutions and modernization projects whose objectives require the destruction of convivial and human-centred economies; ‘developing’ economies and their growing need for foreign capital and technologies are among this second category of development supporters.

For both groups, it is neither desirable nor possible to perpetuate ‘outmoded’ modes of living and producing that could retard or prevent the rapid transformation of all human societies into ‘fully developed’ ones. They both feel that it is imperative and high time that all the ‘underdeveloped’ populations of the world, considered to be the dropouts of history, be given their rightful chance to join
the winners. Hence, the duty of all the developed and the rich, everywhere and at all national and international levels, to join the universal crusade for development.

The Truths behind the Development Discourse

The combined attempts of all these groups and the powerful media at their disposal cannot, however, conceal the following facts:

For the underdog exposed to the growing needs created by economy, be they in its so-called underdeveloped or developed parts, development has *not* represented a change for the better, or a sustainable alternative. It is true that modern systems of production have allowed the emergence of a ‘middle class’ of people with enough income to take advantage of a host of new goods and services to meet their growing needs. Yet the ‘trickling down’ processes that have enriched these few have, at the same time, propelled a much greater number of people into structural destitution. The most tragic and irreversible impact of the new modes of production has been the systematic destruction of the people’s own regenerative capacity to adapt themselves to externally produced threats. In the name of assistance to the developing economies of the South, the loan policies of major credit institutions of the North have imposed, on the recipient countries, huge debts that have acted as a death blow to local modes of production.

A constant strategy of development has been to show the populations in distress that their only choice is between the frying pan and the fire. A disastrous effect of this binary logic has been to dispossess them of their own cultural wisdom and insights for finding imaginative alternatives to their own problems. As a result, development policies have actually hindered rather than helped the blossoming of the endogenous ‘human resources’ of their ‘target populations’. The destruction of traditional and culturally defined modes of production, together with the combined effects of the rural exodus and the brain drain phenomena, have been particularly detrimental to the promotion of self-reliant and people-oriented economies.
The more the ‘target populations’ have shown indifference and hostility to the development practices, the greater has been the temptation, by the nation states committed to the development discourse, to use it as a major instrument of power, control and repression against all possibilities of dissent. The banner of development has thus been systematically utilized for the strengthening of the various apparatuses of subjugation, for obtaining more funds for repressive and military expenditures, and for adapting national economies to the needs of the world market rather than to those of their own people.

At the international level, the unholy alliance of corrupted ‘developmentalist’ regimes with those of the so-called developed countries has become a basic threat to all the peoples of the world, preventing them from seeking genuine alternatives to current mechanisms of social change. The alliance, even when it is made under the aegis of a formally democratic institution like the United Nations, serves primarily the interests of all those opposed to such alternatives.

Can There Be ‘Good’ Development?

To put it in the language of the United Nations, can development be given a ‘human face’?

It is clear that the first failures of the development discourse and its practices did lead a whole generation of well-intentioned persons to seek new ways of delivering ‘good’ development to populations in need of modernization. These attempts brought in new concepts such as ‘endogenous’, ‘human-centred’, ‘bottom-up’, ‘participatory’ and finally ‘sustainable’ development.

A thorough analysis of such efforts aimed at giving development a ‘human face’ suggests however that the search for alternatives within the dominant development paradigm has continued to be a lost cause. The paradigm is based on the assumption that development programmes should all aim at integrating every human activity into a system of modern economic production. Such alternatives tend, at best, to make it easier for this system to
pursue the destruction of people’s own and autonomous modes of living and producing. Thus, ‘good’ participatory development programmes have often served only as analgesic palliatives while the overall economic project of which they are a part has destroyed the whole body’s regenerating capacity.

Inspired by hundreds of imaginative grass-roots movements that have been initiated by the very victims of development, new currents of thought have emerged, in the last few decades, that question the paradigm itself. Most of these movements advocate the creation of new ways of interaction to help communities find their own alternatives to the development paradigm, rather than helping the market-oriented development projects achieve greater efficiency within the paradigm.

An interesting trend of thought foregrounds the role that can be played by all social actors in breaking the binary logic of economic development. Individuals and groups, acting as endogenous agents of change within their various fields of social and economic production, thus continue to search for radically new alternatives in their own specific areas of competence, rather than focusing solely on abstract social and institutional changes. These new actors realize that modern systems of power based on the market economy lead all social actors to participate, directly or indirectly, and in one way or another, in the creation of scarcity and various social injustices. As long as the causes of people’s sufferings and of societal dysfunctions are reduced to abstract ideas alone, and as long as the expected desirable changes are perceived as exogenous factors coming from ‘above’—or from indelible categories or institutions—processes of social transformation remain at a superficial level. True and deeper changes occur only when the social actors constituting civil society are ready, first, to change themselves and, second, to use all their creative potential to finding new alternatives for a better life—alternatives destined both to changing their own personal ways of being, living, producing and relating to their community, and to changing the societies to which they belong.
Further Reading

