Substantiating 'Development': Toward an Epistemology-Sensitive Development as Freedom?

On the History of the Concept

'Development' is not a monolithic term, but encompasses within its concept the distinct meanings, theories and symbolisms attached to the idea of development temporally and geographically. If 'to develop' etymologically means 'to unfold,' then development can be thought of as the unfolding of humanity's perception of progress, one that has not been without constant movement, questioning and re-evaluation (Lyon, 1994; Barnett, 2005; Sachs 2010). To speak then of development makes it necessary to outline the theoretical framework within which development is conceived with recognition that this framework has shifted many times in the concept's historical existence.

As John McKay's (2004) assessment of development theories makes evident, development has been tightly associated with economic growth, but this relationship has shifted multiple times. If it were to be defined in the late 1940s, when U.S President Truman was giving his speech on the reconstruction of Europe, this would have been a linear association. It would reflect the then widespread conviction that development occurred as nations increased their gross domestic product and as economy growth rates accelerated, an understanding that had been established in Adam Smith's much acclaimed work The Wealth of Nations first published in 1776. Essentially, any economic activity that boosted the balance sheet of a country was considered ipso facto development, from which everyone was expected to benefit, both at country level and across national borders.

In the 1950s and 1960s, development continued to be understood predominantly as economic growth, still centred on the idea of the nation state, rather than the global system or the individual. Modernization theory assumed that "convergence" could close wealth gaps between richer and poorer nations, revealing also the strong conviction that the development strategy/way of the wealthy nations was to be replicated by the rest of the world with similar expected development outcomes (McKay, 2004:50-53). Scholars in this era relied on endogenous growth models (such as that proposed by Whitman Rostow in 1960), teaching that growth (Y) is self-sustaining and occurs without further intervention, to establish the market as the central force of development (Aghion et al., 1998).

However, gradually, it became apparent that such expectations were unrealistic, resulting in the departure from thinking in terms of linear relationships. Economic numbers related to development, but the relationship was neither straightforward nor necessarily static (McKay, 2004:54-58; Sachs: preface). Building on old Marxist interpretations of history as class conflict, and new counter-paradigms such as the dependency theory articulated predominantly by Latin American economists, scholars and practitioners attacked the established modernization theories demonstrating that wealthy countries had made it only by systematically relying on the exploitation of the poorer countries' physical resources (Gunder Frank, 1970). As Wolfgang Sachs explains, it was the ecological degradation that Western modernization brought to Latin America and Africa that allowed Europe's industrial economy "to take off" (2010: preface xii).

The dependencia theory was accompanied by other works that further criticized Western notions of development as uniformly distributed economic growth. Albert Hirschman (1971) questioned the notion of development as a "balanced" process, while Gunner Myrdal argued that the increase of "spread" (investments) was accompanied by increase in "backwash" effects, intensifying inequalities across national borders (Myrdal, 1957). Finally, the Asian miracle (represented mainly by Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore) bolstered such criticisms because it evinced that development could be attained through alternative strategies (McKay, 2004: 58-61). Later, China's hybrid economy model that merged aspects of capitalism with elements of socialism became, and still remains, the counter-example par excellence to standard theories of modernization born in the West.

In the aftermath, development as a word was not relinquished, but the need for new semantic attachments became urgent. Amartya Sen's (1999) conceptualisation of "development as freedom," which saw societal advancement as an increase in people's "capabilities" to make choices and to actually implement those, was not only timely but was received with much enthusiasm (reflected in Sen's 1998 Noble Prize). With poverty becoming widespread and the gap between rich and poor growing uncontrollably, discourses of needs- and rights-based development emerged, and the attention moved from national statistics to individual welfare. Now the concern revolved around securing decent living standards for all persons regardless of income and economic class, by finding ways to use capitalism for the benefit of the vulnerable.

Nonetheless, despite this new understanding of development as more than economic growth, modernization theories did not disappear and gained ground again with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East Asian economic crisis. McKay (2004:61-63) refers to this chapter in human history as the "Neo-liberal ascendancy." The neo-liberal school discredited all systems that had opposed free markets, advocated for minimization of the role of government in the economy and proposed that market failures were the outcome of too much intervention (as opposed to unbridled capitalism). Emphasis was again put on privatization and liberalization, but this time not within national boundaries only, but extending transnationally foreshadowing the arrival of the globalized system. Not surprisingly, many still see 'globalization' as euphemism for early modernization theories (Gray, 1998; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001; Sachs, 2010). For example, the association led Gildert Rist (2010, 23) to blatantly redefine development as the "transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations in order to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by means of market exchange, to effective demand."

For many others, however, globalization is the movement toward a common culture grounded in shared notions of human rights and individual self-affirmation, a human-centred view of development as empowerment (Sachs, 2010: viii). The sector of international development has leveraged and, in fact, contributed to this globalising trend of economy, culture and values. West-borne concepts and standards of development have become easier to transpose cross-culturally since local populations have been increasingly exposed to western science, lifestyles and ideals through globalisation, in turn reinforcing the trend of global convergence. It is likely due to this feedback effect that concepts such as empowerment, gender and gender equality have become international lingua franca, even though these terms and the theoretical frameworks in which they are embedded emanate from western epistemology and are based on western philosophical assumptions that may be contradicting and even subverting local belief systems and normative frameworks (Istratii, 2017).

Regardless of the multiple ways in which development has been appropriated by economic, political and ideological interests, the notion of development seems hard to abandon. While this may reflect the powerful international development industry and its vested interests, it is also the effect of development questions remaining pertinent and urgent to people around the world. Unquestionably, many in the global population still lack basic resources to live a sustainable life, physical and financial security, political stability, freedom to expression, and so forth. Instead of abandoning or redefining (again) the concept and pretending that the appropriations it implies cease to exist, it may be more pragmatic for our post-colonial times to consider how development may be substantiated to become relevant to communities and populations that need and seek solutions to such problems. My sense is that a first essential step in this direction would be to admit that development has yet to fully account for, and is certainly not based on, local communities' worldviews and normative values.

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The Missing Epistemological Debate

> **"Albeit the progression and unrelenting questioning the concept of development has seen over the years, development practice continues to be broadly enacted within a secular logic and remains bounded to post-Enlightenment western epistemology."**

Albeit the progression and unrelenting questioning the concept of development has seen over the years, development practice continues to be broadly enacted within a secular logic and remains bounded to post-Enlightenment western epistemology. In a recent article I defined epistemology as "the criteria and sources for valid knowledge as related to a specific cosmology...under the understanding that individuals become conscious agents within specific belief systems where they acquire the tools and standards for reasoning" (Istratii, 2017: 4). I conceived epistemology as being intimately related to the cosmology or world-sense in which it is embedded and which pronounces the boundaries of knowing in the first place.[2] Since Enlightenment, the West has steadily relegated human knowledge and knowledge-making to the immanent sphere and increasingly embedded it within an anti-humanist and anti-ontology discursive social matrix. This epistemology reflects the specific historical experiences of western societies with Christian scholasticism and secular Enlightenment, which have steadily fostered the current post-modern philosophical paradigm. Such a cosmology, the techno-science and the development priorities and perceptions that emanate from it need not be relevant to communities and populations of non-western/non-secular belief systems. Cosmologies, as the products of unique historical processes, are diverse and beget different conceptual repertoires by which people process and analyse their surroundings, themselves and, inter alia, the directions and possibilities for progress.

During five years of experience as an (independent) gender and development researcher and practitioner in sub-Saharan Africa, I have recurrently come across communities and individuals who envisioned development not exclusively under western ideals and standards, but primarily in view of their distinct non-secular/non-western belief and value systems. As one example, in 2014 I conducted a participatory ethnographic study in a Muslim rural community of Senegal to investigate gender subjectivities and norms through the local religio-cultural framework and epistemology. A dialogical workshop was organised in the community with a diverse, gender-mixed group, as part of which I explored the participants' conceptions of development. Although development was generally associated with material improvements and life security by my rural interlocutors, they all emphasised and agreed that development must also ensure the peaceful transformation of local culture, the preservation of religion, tradition and customs (Istratii 2015). This only began to capture the importance that the local religio-cultural cosmology held for the research participants, but also the challenges behind delineating and motivating change when tradition, custom and religious beliefs intertwine in intricate ways with globalising trends to shape attitudes and define conceptual possibilities for local development.

And yet, the incorporation of religious beliefs in the analysis of human attitudes and behaviours and societal experiences for the purpose of guiding development practice has been a fairly recent phenomenon (Tomalin, 2007, 2011, 2015; Bradley, 2007; Rakodi, 2011). In addition, the western epistemological tendency of demarcating spheres of human existence, such as secular/religious, public/private and reason/faith (as observed in Rakodi 2011), persists and impedes a genuine effort to understand religio-cultural cosmologies within their own epistemological boundaries and ontological underlayer. Having spent the last year conducting ethnographic research in a rural community of Ethiopia, I have come to recognise that only an approach that forgoes non-local epistemological frames of analysis can start to 'flesh out' local realities in the state of their real-life complexity, revealing local concerns and priorities and perhaps possibilities for development.

An Epistemology-Sensitive Development as Freedom

Amartya Sen's famously proposed that development as freedom means to "to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value" (Sen, 1999: 10). This theory is premised on the understanding that all people have certain states and activities ('beings' and 'doings') that they cherish or wish to achieve to be able to live in the ways they desire ('functionings'). Sen proposed that to achieve these 'functionings' people must have access to the right options and conditions to implement those ('capabilities'). These 'beings and doings' and 'functionings' are defined according to the life each individual has reasons to value, which places human agency at the centre of development. For Sen, development must be both premised on free choice and reinforce human freedom. In other words, the strength of this theory is that it does not specify the life individuals have reason to value since it is recognised that people value different things and priorities (Knopf, 1999). Attempting to define those in normative terms would be restricting the very freedom Sen envisioned as the essence of development.

> **"Development as freedom ultimately requires abstaining from defining the means and telos of development and rather empowering people to articulate these according to their own world views."**

Development as freedom ultimately requires abstaining from defining the means and telos of development and rather empowering people to articulate these according to their own worldviews. This is clearly not the case currently since development remains grounded in western logic and techno-science which reflects values and standards emanating from its historical process and cosmology. If international development aims to support diverse people to live the lives they value (with the understanding that these ways do not violate other people's wellbeing and freedoms), then the concepts and process of development must be defined within the epistemological systems espoused by different communities and populations around the world and must become attuned to the normative values and concerns that emanate from their specific worldviews.

The question then that seems to emerge as central in our times is how a cosmology-informed and epistemology-sensitive development practice may be achieved, if at all feasible, in view of the recognition that development practice is inevitably mediated by epistemologically situated organisations and practitioners who may be alien to or not share the worldview of a certain community or population and do not have the full capacity or interest to prioritise it.

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Footnotes

[1]The Online Etymology Dictionary defines develop as 'to unroll, unfold' originating in the French verb développer, related to the Old French desvelop, which in turn meant 'to unwrap, unfurl, unveil, reveal the meaning of.' Retrieved from http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=develop.

[2]I define cosmology as holistic knowledge system. A cosmology is directly linked to epistemology (valid ways of knowing; see below), ontology (ways of being) and ethics (principles governing social relations). In this sense, my definition departs from a clearly etymological

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