Coping with Social Complexity

Meanings of development

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After World War II national development efforts focused on the achievement of rapid economic growth. In the early stages the central purpose was the achievement of industrialization. Only later, beginning in the 1950s, did the alleviation of poverty become a central concern. It soon became evident that there was little direct linkage between economic growth and the extent of poverty. New strategies were designed to achieve growth-with-equity. Some efforts were made to take account of non-economic, physical quality-of-life indicators of development.

Emphasis has remained on the material aspects of development, but in the 1970s some writers gave attention to the non-material dimensions of development. It is now argued that development should be understood in terms of the condition of consciousness of individuals, particularly in relation to their views of their capacities and rights to act in the world. Moreover, it now seems increasingly evident that the natural unit of development is not the nation and not the individual but the community. Social development requires the development of community consciousness.

At any level of society, development is best understood as the increasing capacity to identify, analyze, and solve one's own problems. The task is not so much the alleviation of poverty as the alleviation of powerlessness.

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1. Introduction

The idea of development—here taken to be roughly equivalent to social progress—has undergone many sharp changes through its evolution in human history and human consciousness. Understandings of the meaning of development are closely linked with people's most fundamental views of the place of humankind in the universe. That is, our understandings reflect our cosmological frameworks.

We often forget that there was a long period in human history in which there was practically no conception of progress at the social level. The cosmological view was that of a static world, a world in which one's life task was to adjust to these unchanging conditions. If there was any progress, it was in one's progression beyond this world to other worlds and other lives.

This static view prevails today in many corners of the world, but we tend to dismiss it, relegating it to the past by describing it as pre-modern.

Development thinking centered on the idea of the progress of human communities did not really begin until after World War I, and did not flourish until after World War II. The first published long-term national development plan was the Soviet Union's First Five-Year Plan, adopted in 1929.

According to Ivan Illich, the modern intellectual history of development began on January 10, 1949:

"That day, most of us came to know the term 'development' in its present meaning for the first time when President Truman announced his Point Four Programme. Until then, we used the term 'development' to refer to species, real estate, and moves in chess—only thereafter to people, countries, and economic strategies". [1]

From that time onward, development efforts focused on the achievement of rapid economic growth. The motivation for striving for economic
growth was not originally to alleviate poverty, but rather to achieve rapid industrialization. Attention was focused on capital accumulation and central planning for the allocation of that capital, all to expedite growth through industrialization. Industrialization was understood not so much as a means for reducing the number of poor people, but as a means for strengthening the nation as a whole, particularly in its relationships with other nations. Much more attention was given to the question of how people could be used to help achieve industrialization, than to the question of how industrialization might help people [6]. Gross National Product (GNP) was used to measure levels of industrialization, not levels of human welfare.

In the context of this press for industrialization, development came to refer to the building of factories and to the extraction of natural resources to supply those factories. Thus, people speak of, say, the development of an oil field, or the development of a fishery, or the development of the Amazon valley. Emphasis on development of natural resources led to an emphasis on the technology of exploitation. In this perspective, the questions of what sorts of values are to be generated, for which people, at what costs, tend to be neglected. The value premises are left unexamined.

It is useful to ask, “who is developed”, and “who is developing?” according to the different possible definitions of development. If we take development to mean the intensive harvesting of natural resources, then we must conclude that Brazil, Venezuela, and West Virginia are highly developed.

If development means economic growth, then which are the developing countries? In the period 1965–1972, the 42 least developed countries of the world had an average per capita GNP growth rate of 1.16 percent; the remaining 63 developing countries’ rates averaged about 3.46 percent; and the 35 developed countries had an average growth rate of 4.43 percent [3]. The absolute differences were actually much greater than is suggested by these percentages because the more highly developed countries measure their growth with reference to much larger bases.

These data show very clearly that it is the rich countries which have been growing the fastest. If development is equated with growth, then it is the rich countries which are developing most rapidly. If to be rich is to be developed, then it is the developed which have been developing most quickly. The use of the term developing countries to refer to poor nations is thus misleading and deceptive.

The idea that economic growth ought to be pursued chiefly for the purpose of reducing poverty did not arise until later. Academic critics pressed the issue in the late 1960s, and it was not until the 1970s that the objective of reducing poverty came to prevail. It is commonly accepted that the World Bank’s discovery of poverty was marked by World Bank President Robert McNamara’s Nairobi speech of 1973. Thus, poverty has not been a timeless concern. It has come to the forefront of human consciousness so recently that it might just be a passing fad.

By the mid-1970s the mainstream argument—that economic growth is the chief instrument, if not the very embodiment, of development—was quite thoroughly discredited. The challenge to the advocates of growth was based not on its failure to achieve the original central objective of industrialization, but on its failure to achieve the newly invoked objective of alleviating poverty. Many studies showed that, although poverty was sometimes alleviated during times of economic growth, it was often unaffected, and often the numbers of poor people actually increased despite the surrounding economic growth. World Bank economist Hollis Chenery concluded:

"It is now clear that more than a decade of rapid growth in underdeveloped countries has been of little or no benefit to perhaps a third of their population. Although the average per capita income of the Third World has increased by 50% since 1960, this growth has been very unequally distributed among countries, regions within these countries, and socio-economic groups. Paradoxically, while growth policies have succeeded beyond the expectations of the first development decade, the very idea of aggregate growth as a social objective has increasingly been called into question". [1]

The diverse research findings show no clear linkage between economic growth and the alleviation of poverty. There are just too many intervening variables that are not well understood.

The response then was that poverty is to be alleviated through programs of growth with equity. As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, development scholars "questioned the emphasis on chasing the consumption standards of the developed countries via economic growth. Instead they argue for a
direct attack on poverty through employment and income redistribution policies” [11]. Increasingly through the 1970s, scholars gave coherence to the idea that development should be understood not only in terms of economic growth, but also in terms of the need for changes in the distribution of wealth.

The growth-with-equity advocates vary considerably in their strategies. Their methods include: meeting basic needs; redirecting investments; increasing employment; developing human resources; strengthening agriculture; implementing programs of rural development; and seeking a New International Economic Order. While the means vary, the meaning of development remains the same: the objective is increasing production and distribution of goods, measured in economic terms.

Many scholars insist that meaningful redistribution of wealth cannot be accomplished without radical changes in social structure, but very few professional planners acknowledge that argument. National development plans take into account the need for more equitable distribution of wealth, at least in their rhetoric, but—predictably—they propose only very modest changes in social structure.

Another closely allied movement, based on dissatisfaction with the emphasis on economic measures, aimed at formulating indicators of progress more closely linked with the well-being of individuals. The most prominent contribution in this widespread effort to create new social indicators of development has been the Physical Quality of Life Index, the PQLI, developed by Professor M. Morris working with the Overseas Development Council [7]. The PQLI is a composite measure based on life expectancy, infant mortality, and literacy.

Thinking in the field of development evolved and grew through the 1970s, but the emphasis remained on the material aspects of development, on life support systems rather than on life itself. Everyone knew there were other, non-material dimensions of development of great importance, but hardly anyone could come to grips with them. They were usually passed over with little more than a note of recognition. Thus, Dudley Seers, essaying on “The Meaning of Development”, acknowledged that development should be understood in terms of “the realization of the potential of human personality”, but fell back to focussing on issues of poverty, unemployment, and inequality [10]. There were occasional references to Harold Lasswell’s enumeration of major values, and to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. But these were little more than lists, and they were highly individualistic in their orientation. No one made sense of these lists in relation to the problem of social development.

The most provocative thinkers on the non-material dimensions of development have been Paulo Freire, Denis Goulet, Ivan Illich, and Johan Galtung. They emphasize ideas of liberation, of finding ways to overcome domination and oppression. It has become clear, however, that the shackles are internal as well as external; that people tend to impose enormous constraints on themselves. Whether through a process of internalizing external oppressors or otherwise, people carry cosmological views by which their roles are limited to that of being the subject of other people’s action. They do not see themselves as having the power, or even the right, to act on and affect the world around them. Therefore, the task of development is, in Freire’s terms, to raise the consciousness of people so that they come to respect themselves, and to respect their capacity and their right to act on the world.

Development, then, should be understood as involving a transformation of consciousness. With Freire, I understand this transformation to involve individuals changing from seeing themselves as victims to seeing themselves as being in control of their own worlds.

I believe that the basic, natural unit of development is not the individual, the nation, or the world, but rather the community. Ultimately, then, the transformation of consciousness at issue is not merely that of separate individuals. Rather, development means the transformation of community consciousness.

2. Human development

When development is understood in terms of economic growth, there can be enormous success in the aggregate, evidenced by, say, gross national product figures, while at the same time there is little, or even negative, economic growth at the level of the individual. That is, poverty may in-
creases even as nations grow. This critique of the economic growth model—quite familiar by now—misses a far more important problem: it is possible to have economic growth, even at the individual level, without corresponding human growth. Ivan Illich has spoken with great vigor against the conventional, materialistic understanding of the meaning of development:

“Fundamentally, development implies the replacement of general competence and abundant subsistence activities by the use and consumption of commodities. Development implies the monopoly of wage-labour over all other work. It implies the redefinition of needs in terms of goods and services produced on a mass basis according to expert design. Finally, development implies the rearrangement of the environment in such a fashion that space, time, materials, and design favour production and consumption while they degrade or paralyze use-value oriented activities that satisfy needs directly. And all such worldwide homogeneous changes and processes are valued as inevitable and good” [4].

With increasing consumerism, competitiveness, miserliness, and the like, increasing individual wealth can sometimes be contrary to human development.

The objective of most development programs, economic growth, is commonly advocated as an answer to poverty. This view should be met with two major objections. First, as mentioned earlier, it is highly questionable whether economic growth is in fact effective in reducing poverty in the distributional sense—that is, in reducing the number of poor people. Second, and of greater interest here, is the objection that increasing wealth is not always the central goal of poor people. Poor people, like rich people, would like to have more money. But the poor may not be so avaricious as the projections of rich people suggest. Many people with low incomes are well adjusted to their material circumstances, and instead focus their hopes and aspirations on other values.

Development should be understood not so much in terms of physical life support systems as in terms of life itself. Good nutrition, housing, education, and the rest do not by themselves constitute a high quality of life. They are supporting bases for it, and they may be correlated with it, but they do not constitute it. Consider how common it is to find rich people who are dissatisfied with their lives or poor people who are quite content. The argument here is that the central aspect of life of concern in development should be the condition of consciousness. By condition of consciousness, I mean how one views oneself and the world, and one’s relationship to that world.

The idea that some sort of change of consciousness is important to the development process has long been recognized. David McClelland, for example, argued for the need to cultivate achievement motivation [6]. Similarly, Gunnar Myrdal said that:

“In abstract terms, we can say that economic development ultimately requires a change in the way people think, feel, and act. Individually, they will have to alter their attitudes toward life and work; in particular, they will have to work harder and more efficiently and direct their energies into more productive channels.” [8]

This view corresponds with that of the Japanese managers of a fish cannery in Fiji who, pointing at women standing at the packing lines, told me with great pride how they were teaching these people to appreciate for the first time the discipline and the virtue of regular work.

These adaptations in ways of thinking fall far short of a radical transformation of consciousness. The adaptation to wage employment reflects a response to external incentives much more than it reflects a true internal transformation of the individual. People could choose to work on plantations and in factories as a manifestation of transformed consciousness, but we would then expect this new activity to be accompanied by great eagerness and joy. More commonly, these choices simply reflect another act of submission to external forces.

The dimension of consciousness of special concern here is whether one views oneself as a helpless victim, subject to forces beyond one’s control, and even beyond understanding and criticism, or whether, in contrast, one views oneself as a force in the world—among others—with some effectiveness, and deserving of respect from both self and others. The leader of the profoundly radical Polish workers’ strike in 1980 explained, “I am willing to work for a plate of soup a day, but I must feel that I have the right to say something about the situation”.

Different stages of consciousness may be distinguished. Low or undeveloped consciousness refers to a view of the world as wholly outside one’s control. Tied to this helplessness is a sense of resignation and acceptance, an uncritical view of
the world. High consciousness, in contrast, means critical consciousness: a capacity for judging that the way things are is not necessarily the way they ought to be or have to be. High consciousness also means appreciating that one has the capacity and the right to do something about the world outside. The internal transformation of consciousness from low to high precedes action which leads to the transformation of the external world.

In this view, human growth refers to increasing consciousness of oneself and of one's own capacities in relation to the surrounding world. Growth—meaning development—does not refer only to increase, whether of size or of any other measure. Rather, growth means transcending limits. One grows when one can do something one could not do before. Some people grow when they first discover they can run a mile; others grow when they first run a marathon. In each case, the essence of development, the essence of growth, is transcending limits—moving from 'cannot' to 'can'.

In ordinary consciousness, one adapts to circumstances. The outside world confronts the individual with a variety of alternatives, and he chooses the best of those alternatives. His behavior is determined by the structure of incentives that he sees.

In high consciousness, one does not simply accept alternatives as given, but instead works to modify and improve that structure of incentives. In E.F. Schumacher's formulation:

“No matter how weighed down and enslaved by circumstances a person may be, there always exists the possibility of self assertion and rising above circumstances. Man can achieve a measure of control over his environment and thereby his life, utilizing things around him for his own purposes. There is no definable limit to his possibilities, even though he everywhere encounters practical limitations which he has to recognize and respect.”[9]

The labor movement of the 1930s in the United States, as an example, was based on high consciousness. It was an effort, not simply to find the best of the available options, but to wholly change the terms offered to working people. Similarly, advocacy of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) by people of less developed countries is an effort to transform the array of options which they presently face into something new. The argument for NIEO is an assertion by these people that they do not have to simply accept things as they are.

A growing individual sheds the victim role, and increasingly takes responsibility for the world and, with reflection, acts on the world in order to transform it. In taking responsibility for aspects of the world, the individual takes larger responsibility for himself.

The transformation of personal consciousness which precedes the struggle of individuals working to achieve a new order is related to—but should not be confused with—the transformation of the world. Transformed individuals can be successful in their work toward a new order by their own knowledge of the quality of their efforts. In this sense, their efforts can be known by them to be successful and effective even while the world has not yet been transformed.

Consider an example. An individual may undertake some political activity—calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, let us say. This person may organize marches, distribute leaflets, give speeches, and all the rest. After perhaps a year, there is no visible move toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. Does this mean that the individual was ineffective, or that he failed, or that he was foolish? From the perspective of a transformed consciousness, one fails only when one gives up.

3. Social development

Some extremely valuable results are generated through social interaction, intangible but nevertheless real and important things such as enhanced creativity, improved understandings, and mutual support. People become increasingly capable of dealing with the world around them partly through direct experience, but more importantly, through continually testing their own views by comparing them with the views of others. Individuals need the interaction which only a society can provide if they are to become fully developed. The raising of consciousness does not occur to individuals in isolation; it is always a social event.

The interaction between the individual and society occurs in a unit smaller than the society as a whole, a unit described here as the community. I use the term community to refer to a face-to-face group of interacting individuals bound together by an especially high concern for one another's welfare. Communities are often territorially defined
(e.g., a small village), but they may be defined in terms of other associations. In an urban setting, one's community may be at the work place, or at the corner tavern, or in a social club. Communities provide nurturance and support. Societies without community fulfill those functions only in a bureaucratic, nonhuman way.

Virtually all people live in a society. Many—but certainly not all—live in a community. In most cases, there is untransformed, or low, community consciousness. The ordinary community is managerial and maintenance-oriented, preoccupied with stability and security, rather than with being critical, active, and change-oriented. A high-consciousness community has a sense of purpose and confidence in the future about it.

Any organization, be it an educational institution, a governmental agency, a club, or a corporation, may be described according to whether its members constitute a community; and further, whether that community is one of low or of high consciousness. With community absent or of low consciousness, it is likely to be bureaucratized. Its members do not share a common sense of mission, but simply act out their roles, responding to what they understand to be the requirements of their immediate superiors rather than to the task of the organization as a whole.

Community consciousness refers to people-in-interaction. With high community consciousness there is extraordinarily good communication among people, perhaps even a sort of communion. People have the same kinds of goals and values internalized so that, being aligned in their motivations, they work together almost effortlessly.

It is meaningful to speak of more or less developed communities. A healthy, developed community may be understood as a large organism made up of smaller organisms—individual persons. There is more to the community than simply the sum of the individuals because of the complex interrelations of the members. The community and its members are highly dependent on one another for the maintenance of their health.

4. Development process: summary

Although it is too limiting to define development in terms of specific outcomes, it is useful to suggest how development should be understood in terms of a process.

The best summary formulation I know is that “development is the process of people taking charge of their lives” [5]. To develop is to gain increasing power to define, to analyze, and to solve one’s own problems. To develop means to gain power, not necessarily over others, but over oneself, and with others.

Thus development means growth, but not in the simplistic sense that some index becomes larger. A nation does not become increasingly developed just because its GNP grows, any more than a child can be said to be developing simply because he grows taller. Rather, development means growth in the sense of transcending limits. To develop is to be able to do something tomorrow that you were not able to do yesterday.

From this perspective, a country obtaining revenue from licensing others to fish or mine or log its resources does not constitute development, but the acquisition by the inhabitants of fishing, mining or logging skills does. Following other people’s plans is not development, but formulating one’s own plans is.

If development is defined in terms of increasing autonomy—an increasing capacity to identify, analyze, and solve one’s own problems—then achieving economic growth, as such, does not constitute development. Economic growth may possibly contribute to development, as an instrument, but this means should not be mistaken for an end in itself.

It may be helpful to think of the development of individuals as being measured in terms of that which serves as a source of pride to them. The importance of accommodating diversity then becomes very clear. It also becomes clear that imposing your standard on me—e.g., how fast you can run a mile—makes me deficient and violates me. I can respect your running speed as a source of pride for you, but I want you to respect the importance of, say, achievement in woodcarving for me. Insistence on any common standard creates deficiencies, denies diversity, and manifests disrespect for people. In contrast, respect for indigenous values honors local achievements and thus shows respect for local people.

Insistence on the primacy of economic wealth as the measure of development is not simply a matter of bad judgment. It has the profound effect of affirming that those who are poor are defective: they are underdeveloped. Poor people may be
enormously successful in their own terms—in maintaining strong communities, for example—but these achievements may be simply overlooked by those who insist on defining worth in terms of wealth. It is no accident that those who are in a position to define development choose to define it in terms by which they are already successful. One of the most important privileges of the powerful is that they get to define success.

The presumption that the major objective of most people is to increase their wealth is, to say the least, an untested hypothesis, an assumption that is made but not explored by development planners.

Hugh Drummond, addressing prevailing views on poverty, returns us to our fundamental understanding of the basis of development:

“What, after all, do we mean by poverty? The income and the possessions of an American, unemployed, inner-city resident on general relief would be like a king’s ransom to a member of a thriving hunter-gatherer tribe in the Kalahari Desert. And yet the former is seen as impoverished and the latter (to anyone who has observed the quality of such a person’s life) enormously rich. Poverty is not so much a matter of possession in itself, but of a more subtle and significant affair: power. The poor have no control over the events of their lives” [2].

The purpose of development should be understood not simply in terms of achieving economic growth or in terms of alleviating poverty. More fundamentally, we should see that true development means the alleviation of powerlessness.

References