

The age of development: an obituary

Wolfgang Sachs wrote a seminal series of essays for the New Internationalist in 1992 called 'Development: a guide to the ruins'. The concept of development lives on – and takes on new shapes as it is reframed by the UN, reinterpreted by the Vatican or hijacked by authoritarian populists to serve their own nationalist agenda. But, he argues now, we need to move beyond its misguided assumptions into a new post-development era based on eco-solidarity.

Illustrations: Pete Reynolds

'Development' is one of those zombie categories that have long since decayed, but still wander around resembling a worn-out utopia. Apparently buried long ago, the concept's ghost is still haunting world politics. Despite the huge upheavals in world affairs recently, all of a sudden development appears to have made a comeback.

The new breed of authoritarian leaders are now enthusiastic about development, for example. Yet, with the rise of national populism, the idea of development no longer plays an inspiring, forward-looking role, as it did in the days when nation-states were being decolonized and even at the time of deregulation of global markets. The Trumps and the Bolsonaros, the Erdogans and Modis of this world still believe in development, in so far as that means large projects, mass purchasing power and unregulated movements for corporations. But, besides being authoritarian and xenophobic, they

are declared enemies of the environment. They promise their followers a roll-back of environmental politics; in fact, they are great fans of the brown economy, rejecting a green alternative. Their image of development is shaped by fossil energy and, more generally, extractivism of natural resources. National populists are nostalgic for the Industrial Age; they are not orientated to the future, but rather to the past.

However, there is a crucial discontinuity in the development agenda of national populists: they are ethnocentric and selfish. From the Second World War until very recently, development, for better or worse, was always conceived as being within the framework of multilateralism. But with the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president, the wind has turned. 'America First' is the battle cry of unilateralism. The interests of one's nation are of primary importance, while those of others are negligible. Trump's echo resounds, for example,

through Matteo Salvini, recently the strong man of Italy: 'Primi gli italiani' (First, the Italians) justified his denying entry for refugees in distress at sea.

In other words, far from the Age of Development having long since come to an inglorious end, as people like me once claimed, the zombie term development continues to make all kinds of mischief. And yet it is true that efforts are being made all around the world to base technology more on nature, the economy on the common good, and culture on civilizational diversity; all of which are objectives that can be understood in post-development terms.

A claim too far

We were naive and a little pompous to proclaim the 'end of the development age'. In the fall of 1988 at Pennsylvania State University, in the house of Barbara Duden, our group of friends began to draw up the outline of what became the *Development Dictionary*¹ – the key points



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of which I outlined in a theme issue of *New Internationalist* in 1992 called 'Development: a guide to the ruins'. On the track of Ivan Illich, who once had the plan to write an 'archaeology of modern certainties', we wanted to explore the key concept of development, which, as we said then, stood as a ruin in the intellectual landscape.

Let's remember: in the second half of the 20th century the notion of development stood like a mighty ruler over the nations of the southern hemisphere. It was the rallying cry of the postcolonial era. The concept seemed to be innocent, but in the long run it turned out to be detrimental; as a kind of mental infrastructure, it paved the way for the imperial power of the West over the world. As things were in the West, so also should they be on Earth: that was, in short, the message of development.²

When did the development age begin? In our *Development Dictionary*, we focused on President Harry S Truman's inaugural address to the US Congress on 20 January 1949, in which he labelled the homes of more than half of the world's population as 'underdeveloped areas'. The development age was opened with this speech – the period of world history that followed the colonial age of the European powers. The development age lasted about 40 years and was replaced by the era of globalization. And presently there is another turning point: the rise of national populism.

What constitutes the idea of development? Consider four aspects. Chronopolitically, all nations seem to advance in the same direction. Imagine time is linear, moving only forwards or backwards; but the aim of technical and economic progress is forever fleeting. Geopolitically, the leaders of this path, the developed nations, show the straggling countries which way to go. The bewildering variety of peoples in the

world is now ranked simplistically as rich and poor nations. Socio-politically, the development of a nation is measured through its economic performance, according to gross domestic product (GDP). Societies that have just emerged from colonial rule are required to place themselves in the custody of 'the economy'. And finally, the actors who push for development are mainly experts from governments, transnational banks and corporations. Previously, in Marx's or Schumpeter's time, 'develop' was used as an intransitive verb, like a flower that seeks maturity. Now the term is used transitively, as an active reordering of society that needs to be completed within decades, if not years.

What has become of this idea? To put it briefly, the notion took a direction that is not uncommon in the history of ideas: what once was a historical innovation

became a convention over time, one that would end in general frustration. Nonetheless, 30 years ago it was premature to claim the end of the developmental age, because disenchantment with the development idea took place over decades – and is still not complete today.

Ideas that become powerful in history do not disappear at once, but rather fade gradually as they become increasingly irrelevant to our understanding of the times. All the same, the tide has turned: even development experts are in a fog about the future, being mostly preoccupied with limiting the social and ecological catastrophes caused by the dominant development model. To impeach the development idea has become acceptable. But let us not jump ahead.

From the end of the Second World War, the discourse on development was framed in terms of the nation-state.

Practically every young nation saw its *raison d'être* as lying in development. But in November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War came to an end, and the era of globalization began.

In the succeeding years the development idea received a further boost. The development mentality spread to the ends of the earth, involving entirely new players. However, the nation-state had become porous, like a container riddled with bullet holes from external forces. Nation-states had to submit to global powers, both economic and cultural. Goods, money, information, images and people poured across borders, creating a transnational social space where interactions take place over great distances, sometimes even in real time.

In this process, other actors, such as transnational corporations and media, played an increasingly important role in development, with the nation-state increasingly falling behind. For example, private foreign investment overtook official development assistance, television programmes marginalized home-grown narratives around the world, and global consumption replaced local craftwork. Development, hitherto a task of the state, was now de-territorialized.

Moreover, transnational value-chains appeared on the scene. With the end of the Cold War and the process of deregulation in full swing, there was no obstacle to laying out networks of production right across the world. Generally speaking, even in the most remote corners of the earth, the capitalist goods and service economy has replaced countless subsistence economies with their traditional markets. And capitalism had changed, as John Kenneth Galbraith had already analysed in the 1950s: from an economy

dedicated to satisfying needs to one dedicated to instigating wants.

In such an economy, what counts is increasingly the symbolic power of goods and services. What matters is what goods say, rather than what they do – they are a means of communication. Goods are simultaneously rituals and religion. Corporations spread out, and on every continent lifestyles aligned with one another: SUVs replaced rickshaws; cellphones superseded community gatherings; air-conditioning supplanted siestas. One can understand the globalization of the markets as development without nation-states.

From this process, the global middle class – whether in Europe, North America and Asia or, less numerous, in South America and Africa – has benefited the most. They shop in similar malls, buy identical high-tech electronics, watch the same movies and TV series. As tourists they freely dispose of the decisive medium of alignment: money. The middle class – now about three billion people with an income of more than \$10 a day – is growing more rapidly thanks to fast economic growth in China, India and other Asian countries.

This is in itself a historical feat: it probably took 150 years from the start of the Industrial Revolution to around 1985 to create the first billion middle-class consumers; the second billion took 21 years to cross the threshold; and the third billion, just nine years. If the projections are correct, two billion more will be added to the middle class by 2028 – making a total of five billion people.³ On the lower rungs of the ladder one is able to afford a moped or a washing machine, while on the upper rungs one can invest in long-distance travel or real estate.

Roughly speaking, already by the year 2010, half of the global middle class lived in the Global North and the other half lived in the Global South. Indeed, the Western way of life has spread to other continents, spanning the entire globe. Without doubt this has been the terrific success of development – yet it is a failure waiting to happen.

Survival now, not progress

'Development' is a plastic word, an empty term with no positive meaning. Nevertheless, it has maintained its status of global perspective, because it has been inscribed in an international network of institutions from the United Nations to NGOs. After all, billions of people have made use of the 'right to development', as it was stated in a resolution of the 1986 UN General Assembly.

However, one can trace the remarkable transformation of the idea into our day. In 2015, for example, one could observe a thickening of the development discourse: the papal encyclical *Laudato si'* in June, the UN Sustainable Development Goals in September and the Paris Agreement on climate change in December. Are these international statements still committed to development? Or can one, on the contrary, consider them as a proof of post-development thinking?

The erosion of the development idea is now obvious in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Long gone is the time when development meant 'promise'. Back then, the talk was of young, aspiring nations moving along a path of progress. Indeed, the discourse of development held a monumental historical promise: that in the end, all societies would close the gap with the rich and partake in the fruits of industrial civilization. ↻



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That era is over: development is more often about survival now, not progress. The SDGs are designed to guarantee the minimum level of human rights and environmental conditions. No more and no less, but the sky-storming belief in progress has given way to the need for survival. The papal letter *Laudato si'* disregards the keywords 'development' and 'progress', whereas the Paris climate deal is meant to avoid catastrophes and wars.

Moreover, while the politics of fighting poverty has been successful in some places, it has been bought at the price of even larger inequalities elsewhere; and at the price of irreparable environmental damage. The World Inequality Report 2018 confirmed that, since 1980, the share of national income going to the richest one per cent has increased rapidly in North America, China, India and Russia, and more moderately in Europe – 40 years' worth of gold rush!

In addition, the use of the Earth is drastically overstretched: according to the calculations of the Global Footprint Network, humanity consumes the biosphere 1.7 times over every year. Plastic pollution in the oceans, mass extinction of insects and the melting of the Arctic ice shield are cases in point.

Climate chaos as well as the slow demise of plant and animal life have cast doubt on the faith that developed nations represent the pinnacle of social evolution. On the contrary, progress has turned out to be regress, as the capitalist logic of the Global North cannot but exploit nature. From *Limits to Growth* in 1972 to *Planetary Boundaries* in 2009 the analysis is clear: development-as-growth renders Planet Earth inhospitable for humans. The SDGs – which carrying development in their very title – are a semantic deception. The Sustainable Development Goals should really be called SSGs – Sustainable Survival Goals.

The geopolitics of development has also imploded. At the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, the pattern of the last 50 years was reproduced: the world neatly divided into North and South, where donors hand down capital, growth and social policies to beneficiary countries so as to recondition them for the global race. This pattern is a familiar sediment of colonial history and was, just like the catch-up imperative, omnipresent in the post-War years.

But by the time we reached the

SDGs, what had happened to the idea of developing countries catching up with rich nations, this notion that was once so fundamental to the idea of development?

It is worth quoting a passage in the document that proclaimed the SDGs: 'This is an agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. These are universal goals and goals which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike.'⁴ The SDGs claim to be global and universal, and the Paris Agreement followed suit.

You cannot express the mind shift more clearly: the geopolitics of development, according to which industrial nations would be the shining example for poorer countries, have been disposed of. All the planning and passion, the amount of resources and romance that went into realizing the dream of catching up! All gone.

Burying the catch-up myth

Just as the Cold War era ended in 1989, the myth of catching up evaporated in 2015. Rarely has a myth been buried so quietly. What point is there in development, if there is no country that can be called 'sustainably developed?' In addition to that, the economic geography of the world has changed. Geopolitically speaking, the rapid ascension of China as the largest economic power on earth has been spectacular. The seven most important newly industrialized countries are now economically stronger than the traditional industrial states, although the G7 still pretends to be the hegemon. Globalization has almost dissolved the established North-South scheme.

The internet provides one example. In 2016, 3.4 billion people, half the world's population, used the internet. Private individuals surf the web with computers, tablets or smartphones, companies have huge IT departments, and billions of people are online every day in social networks. The internet has become the 'central nervous system' of world society. Incidentally, the digital infrastructure with its data centres requires a tremendous amount of power – it accounts for about seven per cent of electricity consumed globally.⁵ This corresponds to the annual electricity consumption of the UK.

What is the geographic distribution of internet users? Most live in East Asia (867 million) and South Asia (480 million); Western Europe (345 million) and North

America (341 million) are in midtable.⁶ Since the electricity comes mostly from coal, gas and oil power plants, the carbon footprint of all this internet activity is enormous.

In short, in terms of resource consumption, the upper classes in China, India, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have already caught up with the US and European middle classes. By the way, in the international climate negotiations, the upper classes of the newly industrialized countries are relatively unscathed because they can hide behind the poor of their own nations.

Furthermore, development has always been a statistical construct. Without the magic number, GDP, it was impossible to come up with a ranking for nations of the world. Comparing income was the point of development thinking. Only in this way could the relative poverty or wealth of a country be determined. Since the 1970s, however, a dichotomy has emerged in the discourse of development, juxtaposing the idea of development-as-growth with the idea of development-as-social-policy. Institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO continued to bow to the idea of development-as-growth, while the UN Development Programme, UN Environment Programme and most NGOs emphasized the idea of development-as-social policy. Thus the term 'development' became an all-purpose glue, which could refer to the building of airports just as much as to the drilling of waterholes. The Millennium Development Goals as well as the SDGs that succeeded them were rooted in this legacy.

Over and over again, the relationship between social indicators and economic growth has revealed itself to be a thorny issue. On the one hand, Agenda 2030 (the governing statement of the SDGs) recognizes the decline of marine and terrestrial ecosystems and the increase in social inequality; but on the other hand, it calls for economic growth for the poorer countries of least seven per cent a year. The contradiction between growth and sustainability is said to be overcome by the new concepts of 'inclusive growth' and 'green growth'. But it is now common knowledge that inclusive growth, driven by the financial markets, is an impossibility because it constantly reproduces inequality. Typically, a decline in poverty goes hand in hand with spreading inequality. Since 1990, the emerging



economies of Russia, China, India and South Africa have experienced a sharp rise in inequality, while in Brazil it has fallen slightly, albeit from a very high level.

The same applies to the slogan of green growth. Even at the highest echelons of the G7 Summits, the fact that fossil-fuelled economic growth is not feasible in the medium term has done the rounds. In 2015, the industrialized countries envisaged the decarbonization of the global economy by the end of the century. However, all recipes for green growth rely on decoupling environmental degradation from growth, even though absolute decoupling (increasing growth while decreasing environmental degradation) has never been achieved in history.⁷

In short, development-as-growth has historically become obsolete, even life-threatening. Nevertheless, Agenda 2030 fails to speak about prosperity without growth, not even for the old industrialized countries. Reducing the compulsion for growth is apparently taboo: that would mean giving priority to sufficiency instead of efficiency in the economy. In an economy where the efficiency principle dominates, ever more things are produced with ever fewer resources.

In a sufficiency economy, however, enough things are produced with a smart use of resources. Some sectors of the economy would shrink while others would grow. This design of the economy would imply a readiness for downscaling the present industrial system. Compared with Agenda 2030, Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si'* is more forward-looking, given that he advocates degrowth for the wealthy zones of the Earth.

The unbridgeable contradiction

Mohandas Gandhi, who led India to independence, was a post-developmental long before the term was invented. He left to posterity a well-known quotation, which summarized his thinking about development succinctly: 'The Earth has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.'

If you look at the quote more closely, its subversive trait becomes clear. No wonder that in present-day India, Gandhi is viewed as a patron saint in disregard, only brought out on ceremonial occasions. Gandhi believes that the resources of the Earth are not scarce, contrary to economic orthodoxy, but rather abundant, certainly enough to

satisfy the needs of human society. He assumes that the needs are culturally shaped and more or less circumscribed, another contrast to received economic wisdom. This allows him to put avarice in the dock because systemic greed undermines the needs of the majority of people. Greed is the variable that decides if people have enough to live on or not.

If the authors of the report of the Brundtland Commission, in 1987, had read their Gandhi accurately, they would not have come up with the classic definition of sustainable development: 'The development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Gandhi would have insisted that not all needs are equally valid, that the needs of the well-to-do would be different from those of the underprivileged. Thus, in the aftermath, the lack of distinction between survival needs and luxury needs has become a pitfall of the debate on sustainability.

In fact, lumping together human rights and consumer rights is the legacy of the concept of development, which is blind to class relations. How can one treat the basic social rights to food, housing and health as being at the same level as the consumer demand for SUVs, real estate and stocks? What do the Mapuche in southern Chile have in common with the Wall Street bankers, or the cotton workers in Mali with the start-ups in Shanghai? Not much, except that they are united in the mirage of development.

But this opens up a dilemma that has always remained hidden in the illusion of development. A recent study confirms that, under the current development model, there is an unbridgeable contradiction between the social and environmental goals of the SDGs.⁸ In relatively wealthy countries where the physical SDGs (poverty, nutrition, health, energy) are reasonably satisfied – as in Europe, North America, Japan, Argentina, Chile, Thailand and the like – there is an ecological problem of huge magnitude. They are all crossing the planetary boundaries, as in the emission of CO₂ and nitrogen, and the consumption of phosphorus and freshwater.

Conversely, where countries remain within their environmental frameworks, the physical SDGs are largely unfulfilled. Roughly, the double-bind is this: the higher the standard of living of a country rises, the more the biosphere tends to be

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degraded. And conversely, the less social human rights are guaranteed, the smaller the ecological footprint tends to be, at least in terms of carbon and materials. What a tragic result of development!

What weighs more heavily, moreover, is the fact that sometimes the wellbeing of the global middle class depends on the poverty of others. There are plenty of examples: local fisherfolk lose out when large factory ships empty the oceans; smallholders are displaced when agricultural corporations massively buy up land; slum-dwellers have to give way when city highways are built; long-established residents are evicted when gentrification reaches their neighbourhoods; workers are subjected to repression if they want to exercise their trade-union rights in factories in the global value chain.

In short, the imperial mode of living often penetrates deeply into the lifestyles, institutions and infrastructure of the global middle class.⁹ Unrecognized and yet highly effective through a variety of complex economic structures and exploitation mechanisms, the overall result is dramatic: the well-to-do are living at the expense of the poor.

Fear of the future

To draw out the essence of Agenda 2030, the encyclical *Laudato si'* and the Paris Agreement, one point stands out: the development enthusiasm of the 20th century is gone. In its place, the demise of expansive modernity has been moving to centre stage. The motto of the previous century (playing on the words of the Lord's Prayer), 'on Earth as in the West', now seems like a threat. The world appears to be in disarray; chaos,

fear and anger are widespread, contrasting sharply with the triumphalism of the 1990s. The rise of China, the decline of the West, the hegemony of the financial markets, the return of authoritarian states: all of these may serve as examples of the vagaries of contemporary history.

If one had to find a phrase summing up the current atmosphere in the Global North, as well as parts of the Global South, it would be: fear of the future. There is a fear that life prospects are shrinking and that children and grandchildren will be less well-off than their parents and grandparents. A suspicion is spreading within the global middle class that the expectations kindled by development are not going to be fulfilled.

The middle classes in formerly rich countries, thinned out by globalization, now call for protection and security. At the same time, large parts of the population in the emerging countries, alienated from their traditions, aware of Western lifestyles through their smartphones, yet excluded from the modern world, are resorting to nationalistic pride.

Everywhere there is a huge polarization between rich and poor. However, while in the nation-states of yesteryear the losers were still capable of demanding corrections from the winners, they are no longer able to do so in times of globalization. The transnational economy, especially the financial sector, triumphs over the living conditions of each country. In response, national populism has emerged – with its many facets.

Facing the turbulences of today's world, framing social problems as 'development problems' is strangely outdated.

If everything is not misleading, three narratives of social transformation can be identified: the narratives of fortress, globalism and solidarity.

Fortress thinking expressed through national populism revives the glorious past of an imagined people. Authoritarian leaders bring back pride, while others are scapegoated – from Muslims to the UN. This leads to hatred of foreigners, sometimes coupled with religious fundamentalism. A kind of 'affluence chauvinism' is widespread, in particular amongst the middle classes whose material goods need to be defended against the poor.

Moreover, national populists have nothing but contempt for ecology. They welcome drilling for oil in the sea, fracking, coalmining and deforestation. They consider climate change to be a finely woven list of the enemies of the national economy. They are so backward looking that they glorify the plundering of nature. Except for their xenophobia, they could be considered as revenants of the developmental ideology of the 1950s. This adds to the anachronism of national populism.

In contrast, the narrative of globalism revolves around the image of the planet as an archetypal symbol. Instead of the fortress mercantilism of 'America First', globalists promote an ideally deregulated, free-trade world, which is meant to bring wealth and wellbeing to corporations and consumers. The globalists, however, consider the present economic system unsustainable. Compared with the politics of neoliberalism, they give more space for public investments, more reforms of the social sector, and generally more leadership of public policy. Above all, they strive for economic growth within the framework of a 'green economy'.

The globalized elite may worry about the future, but such difficulties can seemingly be overcome with inclusive growth, smart technologies and environmental guidelines for market forces. To a large extent, the UN Agenda 2030, with its Sustainable Development Goals, fits into this frame of thought.

The narrative of solidarity is different. The eco-social ethic stands in opposition to fortress thinking as well as to the narrative of globalism. It foresees a post-capitalist era, based on a cultural shift toward eco-solidarity. The economic monoculture, which reigns in large parts of the world, would make room for civilizational alternatives, be it the worldview

of *Ubuntu* or *Buen vivir*, be it European humanism or community spirit.¹⁰

In the mindset of solidarity, human rights – collective and individual – and ecological principles are valued highly; market forces are seen not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end. The politics of solidarity promotes a cultural rather than technical change, underpinned by co-operative economic forms and public-welfare policies. In contrast to globalism, the narrative of solidarity pleads for permeable but no open borders, imposing certain conditions for migrants, commodities and capital, just as a membrane of a living cell.

Furthermore, as expressed in the slogan 'think globally, act locally', a cosmopolitan localism is nurtured whereby local politics must also take into account the needs of the transnational community. This means quitting the imperial way of life that industrial civilization demands, leaving land, food and capital in the hands of the Global South. Particularly in the face of ecological collapse, it is imperative, in the North as well as in the South, to phase out the economic system

based on fossil resources, supplanting it with an economic system based on biodiversity.

This transition implies wind as well as solar power to provide energy and regenerative agriculture to provide food and fibre. Instead of expansive modernity it is time for reductive modernity: green enterprises, zero-emissions housing, much lower amounts (by European standards) of motorized traffic, much less consumption of meat, and generally less ownership and more sharing. And finally, new forms of frugal prosperity are called for: affluence of time instead of affluence of goods; labour of care instead of wage labour; partaking in nature instead of taking part in the rat race.

As we confront the fear of the future, the basic direction of politics is at stake; this paradigmatic dispute will be on the agenda for decades to come. Thus, development, like monarchy or feudalism, is about to move further and further into the haze of history, of interest only for students and scholars. Shaping our destiny beyond development is the task that lies ahead of us. ●

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¹ Sachs, Wolfgang (ed), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Zed Books, 1992 (new edition 2019). ² Other authors exploring this idea in the 1990s included Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton University Press, 1995, and Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development*, Zed Books, 1997. ³ Homi Kharas, *The Unprecedented Expansion of the Global Middle Class: An Update*, Brookings Institution, Washington, February 2017, p 11. ⁴ United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, United Nations, 2015. ⁵ Greenpeace USA, *Clicking Clean*, Washington, 2017. ⁶ Simon Kemp, *Digital in 2016: We Are Social*, London, 2016. ⁷ Tim Jackson and Robin Webster, *Limits Revisited: A Review of the Limits To Growth Debate*, APPG, 2016; European Environmental Bureau, *Decoupling Debunked*, Brussels, July 2019. ⁸ Daniel W O'Neill et al, 'A Good Life for All within Planetary Boundaries', *Nature Sustainability*, 1, 88–95, 2018. ⁹ Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, 'The Imperial Mode of Living', in: Clive L Spash (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Ecological Economics*, Routledge, 2017. ¹⁰ Kothari, Ashish, et al, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, Tulika Books, 2019.

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