

Development

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Glossary

Anthropocene Term used to describe the current geological period where humans have had a significant impact on the natural environment.

Eurocentrism A way of thinking which assumes that the European experience is the only or the best way of achieving something and that Europe should be the model for other parts of the world to follow.

Global North A term derived from the Brandt Commission's reports in the 1980s which divided the world into two parts: North and South. The Global North encompassed the economically richer countries of Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, and Canada.

Global South The collective term coined by the Brandt Commission in the 1980s to refer to the economically poorer countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) The value of all goods and services produced within a national boundary.

Gross National Product (GNP) The value of all goods and services claimed by the residents of a particular country, regardless of where the goods and services were produced.

Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) A not-for-profit organization which is neither part of the public sector or a private company. NGOs vary in size from large global-scale operations to small, local community-based organizations.

Postcolonialism A theoretical approach which seeks to decenter concepts and theories which derive from perspectives from the Global North.

Conceptions of development and underdevelopment vary over time and space and the explanations for differences in development are similarly diverse. Geographers have considered "development" in two different ways: first as a term encompassing ideas of economic, political, and social progress, and second, as referring specifically to international interventions aimed at achieving such progress. The latter became much more common in the post-World War II period when international attention turned to the situation in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, especially in the context of decolonization and the Cold War. Thus, "development" is often considered as a set of processes which relate purely to the parts of the world which have often collectively been entitled the "Third World" or "Global South."

"Development" has received attention from a range of social sciences, including, of course, "Development Studies." Geographical approaches to development have focused on issues of spatialities and scale, with particular attention being paid to flows of ideas, capital, and people, and the exercise of power at a range of scales. Three main themes come out of geographers' work on development: first, how and why definitions of development vary across space and how this reflects, reinforces, and challenges prevailing power relations; second, a consideration of how and why development varies across space; and third, how development interventions are experienced and generated at different spatial scales.

Development is a grounded process, carried out by different actors, attempting to achieve a range of goals. Geographers and others have sought to examine the actions of key development actors, most notably government (in both the Global North and Global South), individuals, and communities in the Global South, private sector companies, and civil society organizations. The role of these different actors has varied over time as a range of development approaches and theories have emerged, and emphasis has been placed on particular sectors as the key routes to development.

In this article, we present a largely chronological discussion of how geographers have considered development; however, key questions cut across the different time periods and while we have to present a rather simplified view for the purposes of this discussion, it is important to remember that approaches and theories coexist and overlap at times.

Development as Modernization

Ideas of progress and civilization were key to the colonial projects embarked upon by European powers from the 15th Century onward; however, such ideas were rarely framed in terms of development as a concept. The idea of development really emerged in the post-World War II era when it was believed that poverty was not the inevitable destiny of humankind. This awareness

was spurred by the emerging affluence witnessed in the developed Global North. After the horrors of war and the earlier period of global economic insecurity in the 1930s, and within the context of increased decolonization as the countries of Africa and Asia moved toward independence, debates around the correct development path became more common. The other major influence for the emergence of development as an “ideal” was the Cold War, whereby both the United States and the Soviet Union were competing to attract newly independent countries to join their respective camps—capitalist or communist/socialist. They did so partly by providing development assistance and support.

Development from the point of view of the “First World” or capitalist world was based on the experiences of the Global North, and placed a particular form of modernity as the goal. Modernity included urbanization, industrialization, nation-state building, and the replacement of traditional patterns of thoughts and belief with a notion of scientific economic rationality. Development was therefore seen as a process of catching up with the Global North by adopting the policies that had been viewed as successful in North America and Western Europe. These policies were to be implemented by governments in the Global South, often with assistance or aid from multilateral institutions (such as the World Bank) and Northern governments.

Economic growth was a key indicator of modernization or development, and a range of economic indicators were used to measure development. These included gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP), GNP or GDP per capita, and annual changes in these measures. Other indicators used to assess development included the contribution of agriculture, industry, and services to the national economic or the makeup of the national labor force. The assumption was that national-level economic progress would be associated with improved standards of living as health and education levels improved due to rising levels of wealth. There was also a belief that the benefits of modernization would eventually spread throughout the entire population through processes of “trickle-down.”

Geographers became involved in mapping different levels of development (based on economic measures) at both national and subnational levels. Differences between countries were understood to represent different stages in a linear progression from “traditional” or “backward” societies to “modern” or “developed” ones. The solution was to follow the examples of the countries of the Global North to ensure that internal conditions were appropriate for development.

Within countries, development or modernization was assumed to spread outward from a number of core areas. Geographers represented such diffusion through mapping the spread of infrastructure, such as roads and railways, health centers, and schools. The main actors of such modernizing tendencies were national governments, external donors, and private sector companies. Policy debates flowing from such analyses focused on whether the concentration of investment in key locations would exacerbate or alleviate spatial inequalities over time. Based on his research in Venezuela, John Friedmann argued that the use of growth poles as sites of investment would eventually lead to the spread of economic development out from these key sites. In contrast, Gunnar Myrdal claimed that without state intervention, growth poles would separate investment and people, leaving more peripheral areas behind.

Emphasis on economic progress came to occupy the center stage of development in the postwar period. Here economic growth as a mythically imbibed concept became a proxy for development and economists maintained the primacy of growth of per capita income as a standard index for development. Increased production and consumption were seen as twin processes to achieve the goals of development. Indeed, distribution of wealth and assets were rarely considered appropriate in a growth-obsessed society. This focus has been criticized as being Eurocentric both in the definition of development used and the routes by which development is to be achieved.

Marxist and Structuralist Approaches to Development

In the 1960s and 1970s, geographers, among others, continued to focus on processes of uneven development, both globally and within countries. Rather than viewing spatial differences in development as reflecting variations in stages along a development path, many geographers adopted a more radical interpretation, arguing that despite all the optimism of development there were structural factors that both explained existing patterns of development and prevented countries in the Global South achieving development in the future. Processes of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism were used to explain global development inequalities. As with the modernization ideas discussed earlier, development was again defined largely as economic progress, which, it was assumed, would result in welfare improvements.

Many geographers drew on ideas and theories coming from the Latin American experience. These included the Latin American structuralist ideas derived from the work of Raúl Prebisch and colleagues at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA or CEPAL in its Spanish acronym). In the post–World War II period, Prebisch argued that Latin American countries would not be able to achieve the levels of economic development found in the countries of the Global North because the global economic system was very different and unequal in the middle of the 20th Century, compared with that found in the 18th and 19th centuries when many European countries and the United States had made great economic progress. The economic power of Global North countries in the 20th Century meant that it was almost impossible for poorer countries to progress in the same way. For Prebisch, a key policy solution was for Latin American nations to protect their national economies, particularly infant industries, through the use of tariff barriers and other forms of protectionism.

Other scholars drew on the theories of the so-called “dependency school,” which adopted Marxist approaches to explanations of development and underdevelopment in the Global South. For example, Andre Gunder Frank’s work on economic change in Brazil and Chile since the start of European colonialism in Latin America concluded that capitalism and colonialism created conditions of underdevelopment and exacerbated economic inequalities at a range of scales. Thus, according to dependency theorists, global

development inequalities were not just a reflection of different stages of capitalist development, but rather were a creation of capitalist development in the Global North which was partly based on the exploitation of the Global South.

Geographers who interpreted capitalist development processes as the causes of global inequalities between the North and South were part of a broader field of radical geography which developed in the 1960s drawing on Marxist theory. The inevitable outcome of such analyses was to advocate an end to capitalism.

Neoliberalism as a Route to Development

Under postwar modernization interpretations of development and those of Marxists and structuralists, the state at national and local levels was viewed as an important actor in guiding and shaping development, although, of course, theorists differed in the extent to which they believed the state should be in overall control. By the 1970s, however, a growing body of theory, particularly in political science and economics, was emerging which was drawing on ideas from the 19th Century and earlier about the role of the market in economic progress and development. This set of theories was termed “neoliberalism.” Rather than being a positive or productive force in development, neoliberal theorists argued that the state acts as a brake on growth as it is inefficient and open to corruption and mismanagement. Instead, decisions about what to produce, where to produce, and how much to charge should be determined by the invisible hand of market. The central priorities for essential development were identified as structural reform, financial deregulation, liberalization, and privatization. Once again, the core meaning of development was economic growth, but now the agency of development shifted from the state to the market.

Global economic events in the 1970s provided the conditions whereby neoliberal policies could be implemented. Sharp rises in oil prices followed by a slowdown in the global economy and an increase in interest rates meant that many countries found it increasingly difficult to meet their external debt payments. During the postwar period, many governments in both the Global North and Global South had borrowed significant amounts of money to fund large-scale modernization and development projects. With the economic changes of the 1970s, such a development approach came under threat. Following Mexico in 1982, many countries defaulted on their debt repayments. In order to gain access to foreign currency, the only option available was to approach the international financial institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

These organizations agreed to provide financial support on condition that countries followed certain policies encompassed in “structural adjustment programs” (SAPs). These were based on key neoliberal principles of reducing state involvement in production decisions and promoting the role of the free market. The main dimensions of SAPs were privatizations, reductions in tariff barriers and import quotas, currency devaluation, and an opening up to foreign investment. Cutting back on government spending also involved the laying-off of large numbers of staff and major reductions in welfare expenditure.

Geographers have considered neoliberalism in the context of development in three major ways. First, they have examined how neoliberalism as an ideology and set of practices has moved around the world and been implemented in particular places through processes of neoliberalization. While the World Bank and IMF set the conditions for SAPs and governments had few, if any, alternative options for continued financing, there were variations in how governments and national elites engaged in implementing the policies. SAPs and the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s and early 1990s were criticized for their insensitivity to cultural and social differences, presenting a set of technical solutions that could be applied regardless of location. These critiques led to a shift toward nationally specific “poverty reduction strategies,” which have to include consultation with appropriate stakeholders throughout the country. While this move was welcome, it was still based on an attempt to implement technical solutions rather than considering how power is exercised and experienced, that is, an understanding that development has a political dimension.

The second way in which geographers have examined neoliberalism within a development context is through investigating the spatial imaginaries that are mobilized in development thinking, and the new forms of spatial organization that emerge. Often drawing on postdevelopment thinking (see later) this research highlights the discursive construction of spaces that require development intervention because of high levels of economic poverty. In addition, development and security have increasingly been linked together in policy debates, with international development policy focusing on so-called “fragile states” or states with “poor governance,” lacking transparency and the rule of law. Lack of security is seen as an obstacle to development, but also a threat to other countries through violence, population displacement, and disease.

Free trade zones or export-processing zones are examples of particular spatial formations that have been at the heart of some neoliberal development policies. These particular locations are seen as key to market-led policies, encouraging foreign investment, job creation, and international trade. It is important to note the role of governments in the creation and regulation of such neoliberal spaces. Outside of these specific spatial forms, neoliberal policies have also been seen to reshape understandings of cities through identifying informal settlements as ripe for redevelopment by real estate corporations, sometimes as part of supposed housing improvement programs. The increased popularity of development tools, such as microcredit, have also reframed low-income communities as potential sources of profit for financial institutions, and promote ideas of an ideal neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject. While this is an important shift from ignoring such communities, or seeing them purely as passive recipients of external support, such framings ignore the perspectives and aspirations of community members.

Finally, geographers have examined neoliberalism and development by exploring the impacts of neoliberal policies on people, particularly marginal groups such as the poor and women. Such research has often concluded that while macroeconomic indicators may have stabilized and improved as a result of certain neoliberal policies, social and economic inequalities have increased both in the long and short term. Reduced workers’ rights due to changing labor legislation, the rise of informal sector working, and increases

in basic food costs as government subsidies are withdrawn have often combined to increase the precariousness of everyday existence for millions of people. This is not to deny the role of neoliberal policies in job creation and improved services in some contexts, but to highlight their potential devastating effects. In some cases, researchers have also examined grassroots responses to increased poverty and precarity, through investigating protest movements, alternative forms of economic organization, and social support.

The global financial crisis of 2007 onward provided a significant challenge to neoliberal free market perspectives, being seen as an outcome of unregulated forms of financial activity, particularly by banks in the Global North. Because of the interconnected nature of the global economy, the impacts of this crisis spread throughout the world, but the most severe effects were generally found in the Global North. While state intervention was an important crisis response in some countries, in many, severe austerity programs, similar to SAPs, were implemented. For some countries, such as the Republic of Ireland, significant government spending cuts were prerequisites for bailout funding from the IMF. Despite the causes of the crisis, neoliberal approaches to development remain hegemonic.

Participation and Development at the Grassroots

The definitions and approaches to development discussed so far have been based on ideas about development that stress the economic and lead to policies that have been imposed from the top-down. This approach does not consider other definitions and how people at the grassroots envisage development. So-called alternative forms of development have often stressed the importance of focusing at a local scale, allowing individuals and communities to create and to agree on their own ideas of development and on how it should be achieved. Such an approach is not only more effective, it is argued because it is appropriate to a particular context, but it is also more democratic and has the potential to transform existing power relations by encouraging participation.

The focus on community and social sector development, particularly since the 1980s, has promoted alternative forms of development, for example, those informed by ideas of entitlements and capabilities as outlined by Amartya Sen. Sen's approach to development focuses on seeing individuals and communities as having agency and abilities, rather than presenting poor or marginal communities purely through the lens of "problems" outsiders need to solve. He also recognizes the limits present due to economic, social, political, or cultural marginalization resulting in inequalities in entitlements. Sen sees development as encompassing ideas of freedom whereby individuals and communities have the choices and abilities to shape their lives as they see fit.

The role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has expanded with the growing focus on grassroots development. NGOs are often seen as ideal institutions to support local people because they are separate from the state and they are not driven by profit motivations. They are also viewed as being sensitive to local contexts and more efficient as a result.

While grassroots development has been presented as a contrast to other forms of top-down development, they are in fact strongly linked. The growth of NGOs and a focus on community-based development is not purely a reflection of alternative development strategies; the rise of neoliberal development thinking and policies has had a significant effect, for two main reasons: first, as governments have implemented neoliberal policies involving cuts in government spending, services that were previously supplied by the state are either provided by the market at a cost, or are not provided. This has meant the rise of NGOs in filling the service gap for poorer communities in sectors such as housing, health, and education. The notion of "self-help" has often been used to describe this form of activity as governments and private sector companies are not involved.

Second, a key dimension of neoliberalism has been decentralization and a discourse of greater participation. NGOs are seen as ideal institutions to facilitate such processes given their perceived effectiveness at a grassroots level and their ability to engage with a range of social and cultural groups. For both these reasons, international financial institutions and Northern government donors have increasingly directed aid through NGOs, rather than through Southern governments. Thus, the idea that NGO spaces of operation are inherently autonomous of, or alternative to, formal neoliberal development spaces is not reflected in reality. The rise of the development and security agenda has also meant that NGOs are increasingly focusing on themes such as conflict resolution, sometimes in close affiliation with military institutions, again challenging assumptions about NGO neutrality and autonomy.

The role of grassroots development and NGOs in particular in the context of participation has also been critiqued. Grassroots activities can be empowering, as people who are normally left out of decision-making processes are able to participate, thereby creating new active modes of citizenship and reducing dependency on the state; however, participation can vary greatly from mere attendance at a meeting where "participants" are informed of development policies and projects, to meaningful participation involving active engagement in the initial development and design of projects. Additionally, discussions of participation are sometimes based on the false assumption that "communities" are internally homogenous. In reality, power relations within communities can affect who participates and how.

Sustainable Development

In the field of development, geographers have been particularly keen to examine the relationship between development processes and the physical environment. In the postwar period and the focus on economic growth under a modernization model, the natural environment was viewed as a resource which could be exploited for human advancement, which failed to recognize the potential for environmental destruction, especially when techniques used in the midlatitude temperate environments of Europe and North America were transferred to tropical zones with very different soil and vegetation conditions.

Environmental awareness in Northern development circles rose greatly during the 1960s and 1970s, but it was in the 1980s, with the report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987 and then the Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, that environmental concerns came into mainstream government and donor thinking, particularly around the concept of “sustainable development.” The Brundtland Commission (also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development) saw sustainable development as encompassing practices that met the needs of today’s population, but did not undermine the availability of resources for future generations to meet their needs. Of course, the concept of “needs” is very contested and varies over time and space, and there have been highly contrasting debates around how to achieve this goal.

Two main approaches to sustainable development can be identified: the first is most widespread and can be termed a “technocentric” approach; while the second is “ecocentric” and involves transformations in the current forms of development. Technocentric approaches see environmental problems as something requiring a technical solution, such as a new way of generating power or traveling long distances. Under such approaches, economic growth is still viewed as important and desirable as it is market pressures which will help drive innovation. Putting a price on environmental goods, such as emissions trading and payment for ecosystem services, is also part of this approach. Such approaches have been criticized for not addressing the massive inequalities between the rich and the poor on the planet and doing too little to prevent future environmental disasters.

In contrast, ecocentric approaches place the environment at the heart of the discussion and see current forms of development as being unsustainable. According to ecocentric theorists and practitioners, sustainable development can only be achieved if present patterns of consumption and levels of economic growth are dramatically changed. Such approaches usually advocate small-scale, community-based development, which will allow projects that take into account local environmental conditions. It may also embrace Indigenous knowledges about local environments and appropriate environmental management, although ecocentric approaches require major shifts in current consumption patterns among the richer people of the world, and deny poorer populations the chance to enjoy standards of living so far denied to them.

Sustainable development has become an increasingly visible part of the international development agenda since the late 20th Century, most obviously through the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the period 2015–30. The shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which ran 2000–15, to the SDGs represents a move from development as poverty alleviation and a spatial focus on populations and regions that were perceived to fall below basic levels of development in income level, education, healthcare, and living standards, to a definition of development that incorporates environmental concerns much more directly, and is not spatially limited to parts of the Global South.

The SDGs were launched by the United Nations following extended discussions with stakeholders from the public and private sectors and civil society. Today the SDGs have become an established go-to principle by which to measure progress in terms of people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. The implementation process is still fraught with difficulties, not least because of their integrated nature, but also because of global political and economic inequalities. The SDGs are based largely on a technocentric approach to sustainable development, stressing the role of technology transfer between countries and the potential role of green technology in economic growth.

The challenges of climate change have become key in sustainable development debates and policies, but they also highlight the tensions and divisions in achieving sustainable development at global, national, and local levels. Taking meaningful action against climate change calls for responses to a troika of initiatives, from stabilization to adaptation and mitigation. Historically, divisions between countries of the Global North and Global South have been a major stumbling block for successful negotiation and consensus. The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement succeeded for the first time in reigning in all countries to participate in preventing future climate change; however, as with previous climate agreements, implementation remains a significant challenge. With the United States absolving itself from climate negotiations, the geopolitical power has shifted to alliances between China, India, Europe, and Canada to engage with policy imperatives to counter Anthropocene effects of climate change on the planet. An important dimension of ongoing discussions is the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) recognizing that contributions to climate change vary between countries, as does the capacity to support adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Postdevelopment and Postcolonialism

In this article, we have highlighted the ways in which development has been defined and implemented. A recognition of the ideological nature of development and the way in which definitions and policies reflect and reinforce the exercise of power has been a theme throughout. Developments in postcolonial theory and the rise of what has been termed “postdevelopment” have contributed to understandings of development as a contested and nonneutral process.

Postcolonial interpretations of development are that it is a largely Eurocentric product based on an unawareness of, refusal to engage with, or explicit strategy to destroy, non-European interpretations of the world and what progress might be. Postcolonial approaches involve contesting ideas which are seen as “natural” from a “European” viewpoint, such as progress meaning economic growth and the focus on individual rights. Such approaches also challenge the Eurocentric representations of the peoples and places of the Global South as poor, uneducated, and passive.

This latter point has been a major part of the set of ideas termed “postdevelopment.” These ideas came to the fore from the 1990s onward and involved an attack on development as an idea, arguing that it was Eurocentric and involved the mobilization of particular discourses about progress and modernity. For example, Arturo Escobar (1995) used the case of Colombia to argue that in the 1950s and 1960s the United States and the World Bank had constructed Colombia as poor, populated largely by uneducated

peasants and passive women who needed development. Development was to be provided in the form of large-scale, top-down projects, the benefits of which would trickle down to the people at the grassroots. These discourses were often adopted and internalized by government officials and the population more generally such that development became something desirable.

For postdevelopment theorists, grassroots community-based development is a much more appropriate path forward. This would allow much greater involvement of local people in determining how they want to live their lives. As critics of postdevelopment have highlighted, however, this focus on community development has been occurring in more “mainstream” development for a number of decades. The top-down, modernization-driven approach critiqued by postdevelopmentists has been discredited in most situations. In addition, as with advocates of grassroots development, more generally, there is a need to consider how far “locally based” projects can achieve their goals within the context of broader national and global structures. As this article has demonstrated, geographers have long been involved in challenging hegemonic ideas of development and investigating its material outcomes; however, postcolonial and postdevelopment research, as well as poststructural ideas, have become increasingly important since the late 1980s, leading to a massive growth in development research which is aware of how gender, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of identity both shape and are shaped by development processes.

Summary

This article has outlined the key ways in which development as a concept and set of policies has been dealt with within geography and more broadly in policy environments mainly since World War II. There has been a clear recognition of the contested nature of the concept and how development as an ideology has been used in particular places and times with certain outcomes. Geographers’ engagement with postcolonial and poststructural accounts of development and approaches to analysis has been important in this process. In addition, the general trend away from a purely economic focus has been obvious, as has been the tendency to consider grassroots and community-based scales of analysis and policy intervention. This focus on the local is welcome in that it can allow for greater understanding of diverse opinions, but it should not hide the inherently political nature of development and how power relations and inequalities are embedded in the very concept. Development despite its feel-good factor implies struggle and conflict to acquire resources and freedom of choice for the betterment of life for the majority.

Reimagining development in the 21st Century invites us to reevaluate critically the priorities of global development. The deepening of the economic divide not just between the traditional North versus the South but also embedded within the North and the South has thrown a challenge to the very notion of neoliberal forms of capitalist development as a panacea for the global challenge of poverty reduction. It calls for a reassessment of what development means or will mean for the future. The prognosis for development is that, economic growth under the neoliberal regimes has become unsustainable, thereby deepening inequality and wreaking havoc in marginal communities.

See Also: Colonialism; Debt; Decolonization; Empowerment; International Organizations; Modernization Theory; Neocolonialism; Neoliberalism; Postdevelopment; Poverty; Regional Planning and Development Theories; Structural Adjustment.

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