

The Invention of UNDERdevelopment

'Development has become an amoeba-like concept', says Wolfgang Sachs, 'shapeless and ineradicable. It spreads everywhere because it connotes the best of intentions. The term is hailed by the IMF and the Vatican alike, by revolutionaries carrying their guns, as well as by field experts carrying their Samsonites. The concept allows any intervention to be sanctified in the name of a higher goal. Therefore even enemies feel united under the same banner. The term creates a common ground, a ground on which right and left, elites and grassroots fight their battles'.

The notion of development was highly contested at one stage. Marxists saw it as the process of developing into a classless society, through class struggle, whereas the liberals looked for growth or enlarging the cake rather than re-distributing it. There is also the trickle down effect! Among NGOs, several constructs have been considered synonymous with development: people's participation and empowerment are but two of them.

Today, 'development' by whatever name, seems to boil down to one thing: the market - produce, organise, sell, save, speculate ... anything. So long as it gives you that extra rupee, it is 'development'! Even leftist governments the world over seem to have resigned themselves to this fate.

It is in this context - and given recent events, with a sense of déjà vu, that we re-read the Development Dictionary, where the authors start with how Truman, in 1949, labelled the large parts of the world as 'underdeveloped', thereby setting the US and the Western capitalist model as the ideal or aim of 'development'.

The Development Dictionary—A Guide to Knowledge as Power by 
Wolfgang Sachs (Editor). Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1997. 408 pages
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The Development Dictionary

Wolfgang Sachs and Gustavo Esteva

Development's hidden agenda was nothing else than the Westernization of the world.

At the end of World War II, the United States was a formidable and incessant productive machine, unprecedented in history. All institutions created in those years recognized that fact; even the United Nations Charter echoed the United States' Constitution.

The Americans wanted to consolidate that hegemony and make it permanent and explicit. For this purpose, they conceived a political campaign on a global scale, and an appropriate emblem to identify the campaign.

And they launched both on January 20, 1949, the day President Truman took office. On that day a new era was opened for the world! The era of development! In his speech, Truman described a large part of the world as underdeveloped.

Thus on that day, two billion people became so. In a real sense, from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity. They were turned into an inverted mirror of someone else's reality; a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue; a mirror that defines their identity in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority, when in reality they are a heterogeneous and diverse majority.

Since then, development has connoted at least one thing: to escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment. Consequently, catching up was declared to be the historical task.



"Development has become a shapeless amoeba-like word. It cannot express anything because its outlines are blurred. But it remains ineradicable because it appears so benign. They who pronounce the word denote nothing but claim the best of intentions" SACHS (1997).

In order for someone to conceive the possibility of escaping from a particular condition, it is necessary first to feel that one has fallen into that condition. For those who make up two-thirds of the world's population today to think of development of any kind, requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries.

Today, for these two-thirds of the peoples of the world, underdevelopment is a threat that has already been carried out - a life experience of subordination and of being led astray, of discrimination and subjugation. Given that precondition, the simple fact of associating with development tends to annul one's own intention, contradict it, and enslave oneself.

It impedes thinking of one's own objectives; it undermines confidence in oneself and one's own culture; it clamours for management from the top down; it converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them.

The development discourse is made up of a web of key concepts. It is impossible to talk about development without referring to concepts such as poverty, production, the notion of the state, or equality. These concepts first rose to prominence during modern Western history and only then have they been projected on the rest of the world. Each of them crystallizes a set of tacit assumptions which reinforce the Occidental worldview. Development has to pervasively spread these assumptions so that people everywhere are caught up in a Western perception of reality.

The metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing peoples of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life, the word development accumulating in it a whole variety of connotations. This overload of meanings ended up dissolving its precise significance.

Development has become outdated. The hopes and desires which made the idea fly, are now exhausted; development has grown obsolete.

Knowledge wields power by directing people's attention; it carves out and highlights a certain reality, casting into oblivion other ways of relating to the world around us. At a time when development has evidently failed as a socio-economic endeavour, it has become of paramount importance to liberate ourselves from its dominion over our minds.

The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work.

Nevertheless, the ruin stands there and still dominates the scenery like a landmark. Though doubts are mounting and uneasiness is widely felt, development talk still pervades not only official declarations but even the language of grassroots movements. It is time to dismantle this mental structure.

The authors consciously bid farewell to the defunct idea in order to clear our minds for fresh discoveries. This book - and the Digest - is an invitation to re-view the developmental model of reality and to recognize that we **all** wear not merely tinted, but tainted glasses if we take part in the prevailing development discourse. ▶

Awesome Development ?

I am pleased to report that German technology remains the most awesome in the world.

At a petrol pump on an autobahn, I stare in disbelief at the toilet seat I've just vacated. It has whirred into a slow 360-degree rotation. A small round brush scrubs, soaps, lathers and buffs it, retracting into the wall when done. Automatically, the seat is clean and back into position.

Padma Rao-Sunderji, Outlook, July 21, 2003