

What is Development?

Hesphina Rukato concludes a review of a recent book dealing with development in Africa with the following statement: ‘It is hoped that further work is undertaken to further unpack development – what is development – and propose comprehensively what should practically be done to advance effective development in Africa’. Many people are doing just that. Tony Binns, Kenneth Lynch and Etienne Nel (2017) recently edited *The Routledge Handbook of African Development*. The handbook contains some insightful chapters on the notion of development in the context of Africa. And there is also the book by Busani Mpofo and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) *Rethinking and Unthinking Development, Inequality and Poverty in Southern Africa*. I also have a chapter in that book which has informed this piece.

The question of ‘what is development?’ has been in the minds of many for decades. I am among those who are continuously trying to unpack this question, more from the perspective of Africa. For instance, Rukato’s (forthcoming) review referred to in the opening paragraph is of a book I have edited focusing on inclusive development in Africa. Rukato says:

The book analyses Africa’s development trajectory, highlighting the challenges of a

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continent negatively affected by ineffective development frameworks, weak leadership, ineffective governance and skewed and exploitative global dynamics. In some areas, the book offers possible strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Hugo Slim published an article titled ‘What is development’ in 1995. Much earlier, in 1974, Gunnar Myrdal had published an article with the same title. Slim (1995: 143) says that ‘development is essentially about change: not just any change, but a definite improvement – a change for the better. At the same time, development is also about continuity’. Myrdal (1974: 735) argued that ‘development must be understood as the movement upward of the entire social system, where there is circular causation between conditions and changes with cumulative effects’. Other important books on this complex subject are those by Amartya Sen and Claude Ake (1996), which view development as involving those that must benefit from development; something Julius Nyerere had said already in 1968:

For real development means growth of people. If real

development is to take place the people have to be involved.

There are also numerous blogs, opinion articles, book chapters and journal articles that present perspectives on what development is or is not. For instance, in a 2009 book edited by Mikko Perkiö, Marja-Liisa Swantz (2009: 35) concludes her chapter with a suggestion that ‘we need to broaden our concept of development to take human and social development as the basic concept, even when studies of development deal with economic and technical advances’.

Scholars continue to wrestle with the idea and practice of “development” especially with regard to countries of the global South. Europe, as Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2006: 175) discusses, was concerned with the notion of development as ‘part of the philosophical assumptions of the European Enlightenment’, as an example. This Enlightenment – the age of reason – can be viewed as ‘a pedagogical movement led by the philosophers to build a new scientifically ordered discourse of nature, authority, social existence and of virtually everything in the universe’ (Lushaba 2006: 6). This is linked to the idea of modernity which has been critiqued by many on different grounds. Lwazi Lushaba (2006: 3), for instance, is of the view that ‘Africa cannot possibly develop by modernizing or becoming like the modern west’.

It is in this context that many argue that development cannot be equated to modernity – or rather modernity is not an appropriate form of development that Africa needs.

From the 1960s, Japan and the so-called Asian Tigers (Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea) grew rapidly in economic terms and in social development resulting in the idea of a developmental state. A developmental state is a state that is preoccupied with development and vigorously pursues development, working in tandem with other sectors of society. Post-independent Africa was understandably very preoccupied with development, and some argue that certain countries in Africa became developmental states in the 1980s before the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) decimated development in Africa.

However, as many have argued, it is not often clear what is referred to when talking of development in different contexts. Linked to that is what has influenced the conceptualisation of and approaches to development. In the handbook referred to above, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for instance, discusses in detail the Truman and Bandung versions of development, and views development as ‘partly a struggle to end dependency and broadly a re-humanising process after long years of denied humanity’.

How development should be pursued in Africa has been informed by conceptions of how other regions have pursued development. In short, development (or lack thereof) and/or underdevelopment are normally viewed through Eurocentric lenses. It is also often forgotten that the so-called development of the West was based on the exploitation of the Third World,

and Africa in particular, as Walter Rodney (1973) explained. To deal with the Eurocentric conception of development, hierarchies that characterise relations should be dismantled as decolonial scholars have been arguing. In addition, for Africa, African agency should be accentuated as Afrocentric scholars argue. African agency would greatly assist in ensuring the ‘re-humanising process’ that Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni talks about.

There is also a more fundamental issue: Is development similar to progress? Arguably, as Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2006) demonstrates, the preoccupation of many countries and/or regions has historically been about progress. Prah (2006: 178) explains that ‘in many African languages, the idea of progress is metaphorically interpreted as a notion of movement forward, or backwards to denote stagnation or retrogression’. Prah (2006) confirms that indeed in various indigenous African languages, using the examples of what the Ga, the Akan, the Xhosa, the Luo and the Senufo say when referring to progress, ‘the idea of progress translates easily as development’.

The concept of development in Africa, which often hinges and is determined by the notion of ‘good governance’ and respect for human rights, has for years been exogenously imposed on African governments. As many others have argued, concepts such as civilisation, development, globalisation and democratisation are some of the buzzwords that have been used and perverted by the West to make the ‘Other’ aspire to be like them. Insightfully, Elísio Macamo deals with the issue of the correlation between development and democracy in a recent edition of CODESRIA Bulletin (Nos 1 & 2, 2017). The West uses the buzzwords

referred to as a barometer to judge other societies according to Western standards which are supposed to be the norm and yardstick for all societies, as the works of Marimba Ani and others demonstrate.

As many thinkers acknowledge, development is relative, and is also subjective. Yash Tandon (2015: 145) is of the view that ‘a major challenge for the theoreticians of not only the global south but also of the marginalised peoples and sub-nationalists of the north is to provide an alternative definition of development’. Serge Latouche (1993:460) argues that ‘development has been and still is the Westernization of the world’ while Aram Ziai (2009:198) sees ‘development [as] an empty signifier that can be filled with almost any content’.

Aram Ziai has also argued that the concept of development has depoliticised Eurocentric and authoritarian implications – even arguing that the concept of development should be abandoned. This is linked to the notion of post-development which argues that development practice and the concept of development reflects Western hegemony, and that development projects and theories of development are not to the benefit of the developing world. Post-development thinking has, like development (or development theory), been critiqued for being not theoretically developed and for being uneven. Ziai (2013:126), for instance, makes a point that ‘post-development has been widely criticised ... for homogenising development and neglecting its positive aspects, for romanticising local communities and legitimising oppressive traditions, and for being just as paternalistic as the chastised development experts’.

Coming to the discourses of/

on development, Arturo Escobar (1995: 53) submits that 'development is thus a very real historical formation, albeit articulated around an artificial construct (underdevelopment) and upon a certain materiality (the conditions baptised as underdevelopment), which must be conceptualised in different ways if the power of the development discourse is to be challenged or displaced'. Further, Escobar (1995: 104) argues that 'the discourse of development is not merely an ideology that has little to do with the real world nor is it an apparatus produced by those in power in order to hide another, more basic truth, namely, the crude reality of the dollar sign. The development discourse has crystallised in practices that contribute to regulating the everyday goings and comings of people in the Third World'; hence, Escobar's argument that when development is properly conceptualised it has been happening for a long time and driven by the people themselves from below.

Issa Shivji (2006), in the context of Africa, periodises development discourse into: 1) the age of developmentalism (the 1960s and 1970s); 2) Africa's lost decade (the 1980s); and 3) the 'age of globalisation' (which is ongoing). In the age of developmentalism, development was a process of class struggle. During Africa's lost decade, the 'neo-liberal package' (i.e. SAPs) reigned supreme. The 'age of globalisation' was accompanied by pan-Africanist resistance and the discourse sees no role for the (developmental) state. Thandika Mkandawire (2011:7), on the other hand, breaks down development discourse since World War II into two parts:

Almost from its very inception, the post-World War II development discourse has had two strands: the Truman version, for which development involved both geopolitical considerations and humanitarianism, and the 'Bandung Conference' version that saw development in terms of 'catching up', emancipation and 'the right to development'.

With regard to development theory, Ziai (2013:124–5) explains that 'development theory has two roots: nineteenth-century evolutionism and nineteenth-century social technology. Evolutionism assumed that social change in societies proceeds according to a universal pattern while social technology claimed that social interventions based on expert knowledge (possessed by a privileged group that acts as a trustee for the common good) are necessary to achieve positive social change. Both roots can be found in twentieth-century development theory'. Prah (2006: 185), on the other hand, opines that 'Western post-2nd World War development theory can be historically identified and periodised as a three-phased phenomenology from ... the hegemony of Modernisation theorists of the 1950s and 60s, the Dependencia and the Neo-marxian paradigms of the 60s and 70s, to IMF Adjustment packages of the late 70s and 80s. Today, neo-liberal paradigms hold sway'. It is worth highlighting that Modernisation theories were associated with functionalism, the 'idea [which] saw societies as harmonised and integrated systems' (Prah 2006).

Another important issue relates to the so-called 'Right to Development'. As Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo (2002:85) puts it, 'development should be guided and supported within the framework of rights as defined by

the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted by the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) in 1981. They include: political and civil rights; economic and social rights; and the rights of peoples. Peoples' rights include freedom from discrimination, oppression, and exploitation; and the right to self-determination, national and international peace and security and a satisfactory environment for economic and social development'. A new book by Seges Kamga (2018) goes into a lot of detail on relevant history and debates regarding the notion of the 'Right to Development'.

Essentially, as Kamga (2018) explains, soon after political independence in Africa, African countries acknowledged that development in Africa was affected by global inequities characterised by unfair trade rules, global postcolonial arrangements through various global institutions, etc. As a response, developing countries and African countries in particular gathered in the G77 and called for the establishment of the New International Order that would enable inclusive development. In 1967 in Algiers, Dudu Tiam, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Senegal, made a statement that 'development is human right'. Kamga (2017) argues that the 'right to development' concept is a legal concept in the fight against poverty. It is a composite right made up of civil and political rights as well as socio-economic rights, all put together in the interest of human dignity. Arguably, the concept was introduced to academia by Keba M'baye (1972) in an inaugural lecture in Strasburg in France. In 1986, the declaration on the right to development was adopted by the United Nations. The right to development is now a recognised

human right, as Kamga indicates.

Although many argue that development is an entitlement (i.e. the right to development), many others reject the notion of right to development and argue that proponents of the right to development are making up a non-existing right. By and large, the controversy around the notion of the right to development is largely due to the fact that the international community is obliged under the discourse to provide development assistance as well as capacity to the developing world. It would indeed seem that the critical issue regarding the notion of the right to development has to do with why make development a right? Linked to this is the question of how different this approach is from the socio-economic rights approach. More fundamentally, should we not be problematising the notion of development more with the view of better understanding what kind of development Africa needs instead of declaring some amorphous development as a right?

Thandika Mkandawire is among those who hold the view that we have not fully understood what has constrained development, and particularly economic development in Africa. For the record, Mkandawire (2015) argues that attributing slow economic performance of African economies to neopatrimonialism as an example is problematic. As Mkandawire (2015:2) puts it, 'while neopatrimonialism can be used to describe different styles of exercising authority, idiosyncratic mannerisms of certain individual leaders, and social practices within states, the concept offers little analytical content and has no predictive value with respect to economic policy and performance'. Mkandawire (2015:3) describes

'neopatrimonialism [as] a marriage of tradition and modernity with an offspring whose hybridity generates a logic that has had devastating effects on African economies', and that it is factually incorrect that the African economy has not performed well as the neopatrimonialism logic suggests.

The issue should be: why economic development has not been fast enough? And the related question is: why has economic development not resulted in effective human development? As argued and shown in Gumede (2016;2018a; 2018b), human development in Africa remains very low. Looking at the period since 1980, as an example, Sub-Saharan Africa's Human Development Index (HDI) has remained comparatively too low, even compared to South Asia. Comparing Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the point made above – that Africa remains behind other regions – is glaring. As argued elsewhere, the crisis of development in Africa is underpinned by the ideological and epistemological confusion and imposition that define the pursuit of development, justice and freedom. The pursuit of development has generally followed a pattern defined by the West in which a unilinear process is deemed sacrosanct.

As a project grounded in nationalism, African countries are expected to 'catch up' or achieve 'convergence' with the so-called developed countries, as Mkandawire (2011) has put it. This version of understanding development feeds into what Mkandawire (2011), discussed in Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's 2012 Inaugural Professorial Lecture, calls the 'Truman Version of Developmentalism' where development is interpreted as the

Euro-American missionary task of developing the global South in general and Africa in particular. An uncritical acceptance of this definition of development has resulted in the subservience of the political elites in Africa to the subordination of 'politics as economics'. The demonisation of the state as an incapable agent of transformation gave way to the hegemony of the market as the more effective agent for the allocation of resources. The ascendance of neoliberal thought in development discourse has led to emphasis on the depoliticisation of development strategies, thus giving way to technocratic governance.

In conclusion, it is not surprising that Samir Amin (1990:67), for instance, argues for 'delinking'. According to him, in order for Third World countries to experience true development, they should 'delink' from the world capitalist system through adoption of new market strategies and values different from the so-called developed countries. Amin's hypothesis supposes that countries in the Third World can develop economically by changing approaches to production systems. It might very well be that we need to revisit ideas such as 'delinking' as we consider possibilities for true development to occur in Africa.

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