

**Gilbert, J (2004)**

## **"Development": the power of a word to define our world**

***"The idea of Development stands today like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Its shadow obscures our vision"*** (Sachs, 1995, p.1)

### **Introduction**

The use of the word "development" to define relationships between different countries in the world has profound implications, and affects the perceptions of every person on the planet to some degree, both in Western and low income countries. Unfortunately, the word is often used without sufficient thought or care, and the assumptions associated with using the concept often remain unchallenged. This brief paper highlights the history of the use of the word "development" in relation to international aid, and highlights some of the global consequences associated with its continued use in this context.

### **The importance of words**

The power of words to define what is considered "reality" cannot be overemphasised. All the fundamental assumptions of a culture are transmitted through language, and these determine **what** can be talked about, **how** things are talked about and which **concepts** are used to make sense of human experience. Therefore, in a way that is indivisible, the language which a person speaks determines how s/he thinks about and perceives the world. Every language contains the fundamental concepts and worldview of its own particular culture, which are automatically, through a common language, shared by members of that culture. Some of these conceptual understandings are culture specific and cannot be accurately translated into other languages. For example - individuality, materialism, privacy, stress – are common concepts in English but have no direct equivalents in many other languages.

Language is also fundamental in the exercise of power. Those whose language is spoken are automatically more powerful than those whose language is only spoken by a smaller number of people. If one culture can impose its language, it has also imposed concepts and ways of understanding the world specific to the culture embedded in that language, and other cultural understandings and ways of thinking are denied validity and expression. Because culture is embedded in, and cannot be separated from, language, the cultural group whose language is spoken by the most people has far more power to define "reality" and to impose a particular world view, including values and norms, compared with the power of cultural groups

whose language is spoken by a small number of people. The domination of American/English as a world language, and the ongoing loss of local languages, is one of the most powerful ways in which American/Western culture has been/is being imposed throughout the world and other cultural understandings are marginalized and implicitly devalued.

### **“Development” : uses and meanings**

On close examination, “development” is a strange, multi-layered word with a complex web of inter-related associations. The history of the word cannot be reviewed in detail, but some points in relation to the evolution of its use are pertinent. Even two hundred years ago “development” had already accumulated a whole variety of connotations, including its use as a metaphor for the natural growth of plants and animals. At that time, scientists had begun to use the words evolution and development almost interchangeably.

By 1800 the idea of “self development” became fashionable. Marx also used the idea of “development” in a similar way to the way it had been used to describe nature, to describe the evolution of societies, which he considered **developed** through a historical process to a “better” condition. By 1900 the word “development” had accumulated so many connotations and was being used in so many different contexts that its meaning could no longer be defined precisely.

In addition to all the earlier connotations attached to the word prior to 1900, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new use of the term development became widespread – urban development. Since then the word “development” has also been used to describe a specific manner of reformulation of urban surroundings.

Thus throughout this century the meanings associated with “development” concurred with many other previous meanings step by step to transform the word “development” into something that is now used in very many different contexts and is thus extremely imprecise. As mentioned earlier, thinking cannot be detached from words. When a person uses the word “development” the associated web of meanings – growth, evolution, maturation – are also implicitly assumed. In present day usage “development” now always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. The word indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and toward a desirable goal.

### **Development and international “aid”**

The first use of the concept of “development” to describe the evolution of countries from “underdeveloped” to “developed” was in 1949 in a statement by US president, Harry Truman:

*"we must embark on a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.....The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing" (Harry Truman, inaugural address, Jan 20<sup>th</sup>, 1949)*

This was the first time that the word "underdeveloped" had been used in this context. By this new usage Truman added another, extremely powerful, connotation to the word "development", and created the euphemism which in future would allude to American/Western cultural imperialism. On that day two billion people became defined as "underdeveloped", and the rich countries as "developed". Since Truman's new use of the word "underdevelopment", "development" has not only had to struggle with the myriad of connotations attributed to it during the previous two centuries, but also additionally has had to take on the connotation of an escape from underdevelopment.

### **Some definitions of "development"**

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Some current dictionary definitions highlight this complex web of meanings:

*"to develop"*

1. to bring or come to active or visible state, or to maturity, unfold, reveal or be revealed, make progress, make or become fuller or bigger or more elaborate or systematic
2. come gradually into existence
3. begin to have or use
4. use an area of land for building houses, shops and factories

*"developing country"*

poor or primitive country that is developing better economic and social conditions

*"development"*

thing that has developed, new event or circumstance, full grown state, group of buildings

Because thinking cannot be detached from words, whenever a person uses the word "development" the associated web of meanings – growth, evolution, maturation – are also implicitly assumed. Overall, in present day usage "development" now always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. The word indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and toward a desirable goal.

### **Implications for the use of the word "development" in the context of international aid**

The word "development" is not value free. One of the most damaging implicit value judgments in its contemporary usage in the context of international aid is the implication that non Western countries, cultures or peoples are somehow insufficient or not good enough in themselves. Therefore they have to "develop" into something else – that something else being modelled on Western culture. Therefore the concept of "development" also implicitly **assumes** some kind of cultural superiority in those who are already "developed", i.e. the industrialised Western nations, compared with those who are "underdeveloped".

These assumptions underlying the word "development" have profound implications. Many people in rich countries associate the concept of "development" with the idea that all people on the planet are moving along one single track towards some state of "maturity" or "progress". Those in low income countries who make up two thirds of the world's population have to perceive and accept themselves as "underdeveloped" in order to receive "development" aid. These "mindsets", often implicit, uncritically accepted, and rarely fundamentally challenged, are some of the most powerful belief systems underlying current relationships between countries.

In addition to particular "mindsets" described above, the ongoing use of the word "development" also produces feelings of confusion in those who are not directly involved in the "aid business". If "development" is a good thing, why are so many people in the world becoming poorer? Why do the images of poverty on our TV screens and the statistics on the news bulletins never seem to show any improvements? The use of "development" as a means of describing our present global inequalities, and as a prescription for changes in these inequalities, compounds this confusion, prevents other, more accurate paradigms from being articulated and discussed, and obscures the reality of what is happening.

### **The "development" paradigm: other implicit assumptions**

Some of the other implicit assumptions of include the following:

- The concept of “development” assumes a “one way traffic” – rich countries provide aid, low income countries receive. By describing this exchange as “development” in low income countries, there is no assumption of equality, and the wisdom and knowledge of other cultures is not accorded equal status.
- The “development” paradigm also assumes the superiority of a particular world view - the West’s rational/scientific/technological worldview. This ideology assumes that technological progress is always a “good thing” and that any damage to the natural world can be overcome by a technological solution.
- The “benefits” of market forces, economic growth and consumerism as a basis for society are assumed and unquestioned.
- It assumes the primacy of individuality and the fulfilment of individual’s “needs”, rather than the promotion of social cohesion, social responsibility, and supportive social structures.
- The Western scientific paradigm assumes that the natural world is to be exploited, to be used for man’s benefit with little regard for the consequences. Western “civilisation” is now fundamentally divorced from nature and the natural world – for example in factory farming, pollution of land, destruction of landscape. Societies who are in harmony with nature and the seasons, and which practise stewardship, care of the natural world and long term sustainability are not actively valued.
- The use of the word “development” does **not** assume that the ways of life of other cultures are diverse and incomparable ways of human existence, but are somehow “lacking”. There is an implicit assumption that other countries/cultures have to “catch up” to Western “standards”.

### **Do we want a “developed world? The reality of cultural uniformity**

What are the results of 50 years of “development”? In the 50 years since Truman’s statement in 1949 the gap between rich and poor countries grows ever wider. In 1960 countries in the North were 20 times richer than those of the South, and by 1980 46 times richer. By 2000 the top fifth of the population had 86% of the world’s GDP and the bottom fifth 1%.

In purely practical and ecological terms, if countries “developed” to the level of Western industrialised nations, such a lifestyle would be unsustainable due to the production of waste and depletion of the world’s energy resources. Debate about the reality of the ecological implications of “development”

seems deafening in its silence, as people worldwide are caught up in the globalisation of Western perceptions of reality – the primacy of technological progress and economic growth.

In the guise of “help” the process of “development” is also a vehicle for cultural uniformity. Development assumes the continued expansion and extension of the Western cultural values to all parts of the world. There is increasingly little place for the amazing and wonderful diversity within the world’s cultures and languages as the world is increasingly becoming the McWorld – the same jeans, trainers, soft drinks, fast food stores, music and films on the streets of every major city on earth, ways of life lost through urban migration and the absorption of Western culture, languages extinct and traditional wisdom eroded through Western educational curricula. Is this what we want for our world?

### **The power of words**

Cultural imperialism has been more effective in this century than in any other. The colossus of American/Western culture continues to infiltrate, change, and irrevocably alter every culture in the world. The continued use of the word “development” and the concurrent view that two thirds of the world is “underdeveloped”, denies the real ecological, sociological and psychological implications of a “developed” world.

The provision of aid to low income countries remains a “poisoned chalice” or “Trojan horse”. In accepting the idea of “development” and all its associated connotations, rich countries maintain the illusion that their own profligate lifestyle can be a blueprint for low income countries to emulate: when low income countries simultaneously subscribe to the notion that they are “underdeveloped”, the Trojan horse can continue to be given– an apparent gift from rich to poor countries in the name of “development” but containing the cultural imperialism of Western countries and the seeds of the cultural uniformity which ultimately destroys cultural, religious and language diversity.

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### **Reference**

Sachs, W. (1995) **The Development Dictionary**. London: Zed Books

