

# RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: SOME REFLECTIONS

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## 1. Introduction

"Development" is one of the most discussed, used and abused concept during this century particularly since Second World War. In spite of the numerous attempts made to give it precise meanings, it continues to remain elusive, controversial and even source of acrimony. First, there are controversies about the meaning of development concerning the traits which individuals, societies and the world should acquire to be characterised as developed. Second, even among those who share certain degree of agreement on the concept there is a wide range of controversies about the most effective means, methods and strategies for achieving that desired end state or the "Utopia" of development. These controversies would be unlikely to come to an end, and divisions within scholars, and between scholars and policy makers be abridged merely through greater intellectual understanding of the phenomenon of development. However, further attempts at its clarification, identification of factors that bring into prominence a particular concept in terms of its contents at particular historical time as well as the preference for using the concept for society as a whole or its components may possibly deepen the understanding of the concept.

The concept development and some of its synonyms such as progress, evolution, modernisation, growth and utopia and its antonyms such as underdevelopment, backwardness, and dystopia, though part of the intellectual history of the West in particular and mankind in general have assumed greater currency and visibility during second half of the present century due to special circumstances. First, colonialism of 19th century was justified in the name of development of the primitive colonized people. This ideological use of development became more frequent after the second world war as the competition for the resources, loyalties and minds of the newly decolonized people between the two antagonistic ideological camps led by the two superpowers became more intense. Understandably each camp offered its own concept of development, the causes of the underdevelopment, and the most effective strategies of achieving it as more scientific and therefore more appropriate to the conditions of Third World. Second, the ruling elite in post-colonial states in the Third World sought legitimacy of their power and mobilisation of the people in the name of development. Therefore, they have to give contents to the concept, sometimes borrowed from the concepts offered by the two ideological camps and sometimes taken from what they regarded indigenous tradition. They also used it and defined it in their own

ideological framework to stake out a claim that they had a superior vision and programmes of development for their societies than their political opponents.

Changes in conception of development could occur from two sources; first from academic and intellectual sources; second from changes in the context in which academic concept develops. Furthermore, changes from both these sources mutually reinforce a particular conception of development at a given historical moment.

First type of changes occur due to various reasons including internal logical inconsistency, failure to comprehend and explain certain problems within the framework of existing shared and agreed method of approaching a problem among the academics or scientists or when application of a conception to concrete situation produces results contrary to what were expected or anticipated. Second type of changes occur when political and economic context in which a concept was found relevant changed or ideological need for which a concept was developed did not remain as important, thus creating a need for a different concept. As mentioned above the internal academic and socio-economic context influence each other.

Conceptualisation of modernisation, growth and development currently employed by most social, scientists (particularly economists, sociologists and technical advisors of international organisations and of aid giving countries to the Third World policy makers and planners is historically derived from dominant western tradition and experience of western countries (by western I mean both capitalist and socialist countries). Although there has been considerable intellectual effort to disentangle this concept from this intellectual tradition and experience as a result of which several new varieties of this concept have emerged. However, the essential core and basic thrust of this concept persists.

In the western intellectual tradition, the events of great significance which affected the conception of development was the emergence of science and scientific methodology. This produced revolutionary consequences for the West and subsequently for the rest of the world. One of these consequences was using the very concept of development reflecting human contrived change, challenging the traditional conception about social phenomena as changeless and static. This placed changes in social order within the scope of human action and outside the will of supernatural powers imparting "development" a new significance as well as new meanings and contents. Occasionally due to an urge to root their development in their own history and tradition and occasionally motivated by desire to reject the "evil influence " of the West, some of the Third World elite and intellectuals gave indigenous contents to concept of development. As a result, development or its component got local prefixes to distinguish them from the Western concepts.

Besides, its contents and meanings, the concept of development has been differentiated in terms of units or aspects of a unit. Such units can include man, a community, a region, a society, or the world as a whole, more frequently used unit

being a society or a country or a nation usually used interchangeably. Alternatively, the concept is used for the development of different aspects, sectors, segments or components of a society such as its social, economic, political and cultural aspects. In view of its frequent use for society or country, the first type of conception of development will be called "societal" and the second as "segmental" development in this paper.

It is argued in this paper that one gains a better perspective on development if one uses the societal rather than segmental perspective. Understanding of segmental development is useful only if what is learned about a segment is added up to develop a holistic view. The paper also identifies some of the reasons why the societal approach has not been adopted and why the segmental approach has remained dominant. In its second section the paper identifies several meanings of the concept of "social development" and attempts to show their inadequacy. Then it suggests an alternative concept of social development rooted in sociological theory and theory of social change. It identifies six areas of focus for social development and suggests tentative indicators of it.

## **I. APPROACHES TO SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT**

As noted above the concept of "Development" has generated many controversies. However, the core idea around which there is a common consensus is that it is movement from a less preferred to a more preferred state of society which help it achieve certain values. Beyond this minimum agreement, as noted above, several questions arise such as who determines the preferred state and chooses the values to be achieved. Is it the elite in the society or the people or members of society whose values and preference should be taken into account? Should the development be left to the unfolding of dynamics of the society or should man intervene in the course of history to achieve the desired state? Answers to these questions have given rise to several approaches to conception of development. Four major approaches are discussed below.

1. Development can be conceived as total reconstruction of a society in a way that human potentialities of each member of the society are realized to the maximum extent. One definition of human potentialities, to which several social scientists subscribe, is that they are dispositions toward growth, both material and spiritual, towards altruism and love for other human beings, and creativity etc. Realisation of these potentialities flourish or decline in certain material and cultural environments. Total societal development consists of first identifying those elements of environments which hamper or promote them. Equipped with this knowledge, then an environment is created through human design and planned action in which these potentialities are fully realised. The major problem with this approach is that human knowledge including the one based on natural and social sciences does not exactly identify human potentialities and the methods of their full

realisation. Moreover, designs to construct new societies which help realise subjectively perceived human potentialities are generally viewed as utopian reflecting more the wishes and values of philosophers and engineers of development than objective reality. However, "development", in whatever way conceived, often has utopian elements in it so long it is directed toward creation of an alternative society and based on imperfect knowledge about man, society and social change. As this knowledge is going to be imperfect for long, the ideal of development of society on scientific basis and without utopian elements is going to be elusive also. Therefore, the choice for the present at best is between one or another type of utopia.

2. A second view of societal development could be that man and society are themselves set on the path of development by the "goddess" of evolution or some other supernatural force. The present level of development, despite its imperfections, is the result of this evolutionary process which should not be seriously tempered with which otherwise would lead to maldevelopment. History or a society should be left to its own mechanisms of self-correction in its course toward higher development. This view can be criticized for being too conservative, and a defence of the status quo. It is deterministic and fatalistic skeptical about rationality and capacity of man to manage his affairs in the light of increasing scientific knowledge. Few of us would subscribe to this view particularly those who have personal and intellectual stake in promoting the "business" of development.
3. A third possible approach to conceptualisation of development could be empirical and historical one. It can be assumed, as has been done at least since the end of Second World War, that the West has achieved a high level of "societal development" based on deeper knowledge about man, society, and nature. It has used this knowledge for developing new technologies which have solved many human problems including eradication of poverty, hunger, and many diseases. It has developed economic, social and political institutions which have helped the Western societies to sustain them at high level of development as well as ensure their continuous development. Thus, contemporary societies, particularly those from the Third World should learn from it without prejudice against the West and develop themselves on the pattern of the West with necessary adaptations and adjustments. This conception of development is based on certain assumptions which need analysis. First, the assumption that the West constitutes the only and the best model of development, and by inference, the one predetermined by nature and history may not be correct. Man may have missed alternative developmental paths and historical opportunities by sheer chance or ignorance. Besides, it can be ignored that the Western pattern of development has created its own pathologies and crises. Therefore, the Third world need not opt for total Western package. With knowledge of history of Western development, it should avoid its mistakes. Finally, if development involves fostering creativity and striking out new paths, then

uncritical and blind imitation of the West may be negation of the very essence of development. Therefore, the Third World should learn from both Western its achievements and failures without being overawed by its development.

4. A fourth approach, once totally ignored under the mesmerising influence of the West, particularly after the success in reconstruction of Europe under the Marshal Plan and a certain degree of intellectual indoctrination of the Third World social scientists by Western social scientists of development, seems to be now emerging. It is sometimes called "endogenous" development or development through societal self-realisation. It assumes that every society and civilization is unique in some ways and shares certain of its characteristics with others. Its uniqueness lies in a set of core values and traditions acquired during its history giving it its identity. Societal development, according to this approach, constitutes realising these unique and central values of each society. This interconnection between core values and development accelerates the process of development generates and strengthen the motivation for hard work and industry as it springs from the deeper layers of human personality and internalised values. According to this approach development need not be spurred or imposed with the use of coercive methods from national authoritarian regimes or induced from outside. Moreover, such development provides a society and its members a pride in themselves and becomes a base of secure identity, self-rootedness and dignity which imposed patterns of development can not provide. However, there are certain problems inherent in this approach. First, it places all cultures or civilizations at par, thus making one set of values as good as others. This cultural relativism though otherwise as an antidote to cultural arrogance negates the very concept of development. Suppose racial, gender and social discriminations are part of the central values of a society, should their realisations be considered development? These are not just abstract theoretical questions. With revivalist movements gaining popularity and power in some countries, the problem has become concrete and real. Second, some societies seek their self-realisation by imposing their values on other societies, if necessary through force. Should this type of self-realisation be considered development?

## **II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VARIOUS COMPONENTS OF DEVELOPMENT**

One possible advantage of using societal rather than segmental concept of development is that it enables the social scientists and the policy makers to identify, and manipulate or control the linkages between different components of the society to achieve the total objective of development. With segmentation of development such a capacity weakens. As an example if economic development is promoted without knowledge of its consequences for other aspects of society or without giving adequate weightage to development of these segments, uneven

development of society results. Such economic development leads to social or political maldevelopment, regression or stagnation. The thesis has been extensively documented by sociologists and anthropologists and need not be belaboured here. Suffice it to mention that as economic development (in its western and conventional meaning) is fuelled by motivation for creation and accumulation of material goods, it generates social inequalities and social conflicts, weakens communities, fosters social discrimination against weaker racial, ethnic, religious groups and social classes eroding the pre-existing social solidarity without creating new voluntary and humane social groups. It also subverts social identities, self-reliance and self-determination of old groups without giving them new sense of freedom and dignity.

Pursuit of segmental and unbalanced development may create pressure for achieving it at the expense of development of other sectors or segments. For instance pursuit of economic development has led to the establishment of authoritarian particularly military regimes in some countries which are believed to mobilise the traditional societies rapidly overcoming inertia, resistance and social conflict in a society. Such an option, if it is an option at all, leads to lack of political development weakening and hindering the capacity of a society to govern itself with minimum use of force and high degree of consensus.

Without true social development, a true political development is difficult to achieve. If as defined above social development means promotion of self-reliant groups and communities, creation of complex organisations and ability to run such organisation, eradication of social discrimination, a political system without such social development will be highly centralised, authoritarian, and inefficient lacking the capacity to perform its essential political functions and in turn promote development in other components of the society. Lacking such capacities, it easily becomes a peripheral state losing true sovereignty and autonomy. On the other hand, an authoritarian and narrow-based political system tends to smother social development as emergence of autonomous and self-reliant groups, institutionalisation of equality, removal of social discrimination undermines the power of such ruling elite. It has to keep a society weak and socially underdeveloped to keep itself strong.

## 1. Reasons for Preference for Segmental over Segmental Approach

For reasons discussed above interest in conceptualising total development of a society did not adequately develop except in occasional discussion of "unified approach to development" in some international meetings and development literature. The conceptualising development of segments or an aspect of a society such as social, economic, political, cultural etc. is now an well established professional practice.

There are several reasons for the prevalence of segmental concept of social development in preference to the broad concept of "societal development" as

discussed above. They include the specific historical process of development of social sciences concerned with development and structure of agencies engaged in promoting development.

The historical development of social sciences has been characterised by their increasing specialisation, overdevelopment of the discipline of economics, and application of these segmented and unevenly developed social sciences to the problems of development. Under the impact of natural science methodology and pattern of their development, that is, greater and narrow specialisation, sciences of man and society, the social sciences, also tended to move in the same direction. Various aspects of human behaviour and social reality were split up, each social science discipline carving out a separate domain for itself to achieve comparable specialisation. Of course, there were moves toward unification and integration of social knowledge, but they were either feeble or were not incorporated in the main stream of social sciences such as for instance, Marxism. The pressure for specialisation emerging from internal dynamics of development of separate disciplines in social sciences, their institutionalisation in separate departments in universities, professional associations, and journal were too strong impediments in the way of unification of social knowledge.

While specialisation to an extent contributed to the deepening of knowledge about development, it also had serious negative consequences for understanding man and society and their development. The new atomistic and analytical view replaced the philosophical and (in some cases) religious holistic view. As result of it development of total mankind, societies as units, and man as individual were replaced by sectoral development of these units. Development, rather being viewed as a total process came to be seen as a fragmented or segmented process incorporating relatively autonomous economic, social, political, cultural and technological changes. Specialisation in development oriented social sciences created what Veblen called a "trained incapacity" to see the mutual links and interdependence and unity of the process of development.

The level of specialisation of a discipline also, to an extent, determined what component of development was to be more emphasized and assigned primacy as casual factor or as a preferred value. For instance the earlier development, and higher level of specialisation of economics, which earned it the status of "the imperial queen of social sciences", possibly led to overvaluation of economic development as well as overemphasis on primacy of the economic factor in development. Lack of comparable development of other disciplines made it difficult to assess the cost of economic development in terms of other aspects of development such as political, social and cultural development. Occasionally development components of less development were underemphasized or misunderstood. This far instance, seems to be case with social development which is wrongly indicated in terms of education, health, population planning, etc. , rather than in terms of flexibility in social structure, extent of class mobility, integration and conflict between different groups, or emergence of new social groups

organised on different principles and values.

The specialisation of social scientific knowledge and proliferation of specialised development agencies has fostered the tendency toward splitting up man and society into smaller units and theorising about them. While there is need for such division for scientific and analytical purposes, as deeper knowledge of segments enriches the understanding of these units, such specialized knowledge is useful only if specialised knowledge about what is split up is put together again and a unified, holistic and transdisciplinary view of development is evolved. While certain efforts have been made to theorise about development in macro terms and search seems to be still on to find a common indicator or indicators of development, such as degree of differentiation and integration of a society, use of non-physical energy, increase in adaptive capacity of a society in relation to its environments, these efforts have only partially succeeded in providing a unified concept of development. Furthermore their operationalisation at concrete level have not advanced adequately.

As noted earlier, conceptualisation of segmental development is also helped by the proliferation of organisations at national and international levels given the responsibility to conceive, plan and implement development of segments. Existence of such organisations creates a vested interest in perpetuating and protecting segmental development. The coordinative mechanisms assigned the responsibility to unify development usually prove ineffective against these vested interests.

As a consequence of operation of above described factor and forces the efforts toward unification and integration of conceptualisation of development have not proceeded far enough, while the process of specialisation and segmentation is continuing with full vigour. The emergence of the concept of "social development" is product of this process.

### **III. SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AS DEVELOPMENT OF SEGMENT OF A SOCIETY**

#### **1. Inadequate Conceptualisation of "Social Development"**

Compared to other concepts of segmental development particularly to economic development, the concept of "social development" lacks precision, and is somewhat nebulous. As paper by Professor Apthorp " Toward a Social Development Strategy: Some Conceptual Issues" brings out the concept has gone through several phases and has been given different meanings by different scholars and development agencies. Most of the international organisations and governments has generally equated it with improving the physical quality of life (PQL) indicated by the level of literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality, availability of clean water, modern medical facilities etc., In a way the concept has become a residual category. Whatever is not covered by other segmental concepts is included in social development.

Indeed recently the segmental concept of social development has been considerably broadened covering removal of poverty, popular participation, and social justice. This broadening of the concept, however, may generate new controversies. The economists, particularly the development economists, may claim that the removal of poverty means increase in incomes of poor strata through growth or distribution or both. As such it is an important element of economic development and therefore part of their domain. Similarly political scientists may maintain that popular participation is an aspect of "political development" and therefore falls in their professional territory.

Professor Anthorpe in his paper cited above has argued that given the problems confronting the governments in the ESCAP region and their policy concerns the concept may have to be further broadened to include problems such as resolution conflict and maintenance of peace, cultural identity, human rights etc. Implicitly it is an argument for abandoning the segmental concepts and adopting the holistic or unified approach to the problems of a society. These discussions, doubts, and concerns may possibly indicate that we may be on the threshold of abandoning the old concept and adopting a new one.

The inadequacy, vagueness and residual character of the concept of social development seems to be the consequence of its weak linkage with or dissociation between it and sociological theory particularly theories of social change. This weak linkage exists between other segmented social science disciplines and concept of development derived from them and discussed above is itself a consequence of segmentation of social sciences. However, the tenuousness of this linkage is particularly evident for social development compared with some other segmental concepts such as economic development.

As segmental concepts of development are now well established in our development perspectives and the ideal of unified integrated and total concept of development is going to be elusive for quite awhile, it may be pragmatic to adopt a strategy of conceptualising social development which gives it more precision, clarity and distinctiveness. As implied above one strategy to achieve this would be to link social development to sociological theory and theories of social change. This is not an easy task and requires considerable study of sociological literature. For the present only a tentative attempt is made below.

There is no complete agreement among sociologists about the scope of the discipline of sociology. However, most sociologists will tend to agree following Max Weber that its primary concern is the study of interaction between individual, groups, communities and regions ( and if it could be further broadened between people of the world belonging to different nations and cultures). These interactions occur in structured situations in which different individuals belonging to different social categories are ranked differently on the basis of their subjectively perceived or objective attributes following established norms. This leads to social stratification

which in turn determines the patterns of cooperation and conflict among the members of groups, groups themselves and their capacity to act on their environments. Social development occurs when quality of these social interactions change leading to greater realisation of humanness or humanity of each individual member of a society, greater self-reliance and self-determination of groups and communities, rise in capacity to resolve internal conflicts and change the social structure for greater control of natural environments.

### **Foci of Social Development**

Given the above thrust of the concept of social development, following areas or aspects of social life are suggested as possible focus and concern of social development.

1. Institutionalisation of social equality in social structure reflecting the extent of upward social mobility providing opportunities to various social strata of a society to achieve maximum realisation of their innate capacities and potentialities; provision of access to productive assets; reorganizing the society for the removal of barriers against weaker and underprivileged groups including discrimination on the basis of race, gender, social class or caste; emergence of new and differentiated groups and organisations performing specialized tasks.
2. Creation of various type of solidary communities which meet both the instrumental and affective needs of individual; improving the community competence for solving its problems or raising their solidarity by enhancing associative capability of its members for achieving collective goals; empowering it to fight for its rights.
3. Preserving strengthening and promoting the social identity, autonomy, self-determination and self-reliance of members of various social groups as well as groups themselves; encouraging voluntary participation, accommodation, or assimilation of ethnic, racial and religious minorities into the larger national culture and eschewing use of force to assimilate such minorities.
4. Raising the capacity of individual, groups and societies to resolve equitably and durably the conflicts between them;
5. Development of capacity to create complex organisation and adequately run them; improving the capacity of the individual to function in such organisation without alienation, apathy, and feeling of domination by a few;
6. Allowing, fostering, and encouraging individual and groups to critically examine their social traditions and permit a degree of social deviation and innovation necessary for social creativity and adaptation to changing environments.

**(Unfinished paper)**