

Development in Chaos?

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Introduction

Development, both as a theoretical construct and a strategy for practice, is largely a product of the last 55 years. Despite the arguments of some writers, such as Cowen and Shenton (1996), that its origins lie in the century prior to 1945, the shaping of development theory and practice, and its institutionalisation, has been a recent phenomenon (Rist 1997, McMichael 1996). Yet, although it emerged from the aftermath of the last great global conflict (the Second World War), development has been pursued against the backdrop of a long catalogue of more or less continuous political and social conflicts throughout the world.

This paper will examine the idea of development in the context of conflict and disorder and looks at the relationship between development, peace and the state. It also reflects on how such conceptions of development might contrast with conventional definitions of development as an ordered, rational and programmed strategy.

Development and Conflict

The end of the Second World War was notable for the emergence and shaping of Development studies in two ways. Firstly, as the oft-quoted inaugural address of President Truman in 1947 indicated, not only was the 'development age' born (Rist 1997:71) but also development became a means to both combat poverty and promote peace:

More than half the people of the world is living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people. ... The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on democratic fair-dealing. ... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. (Truman, cited in Rist 1997:71-72)

The second key factor was the foundation of the United Nations in 1945. The United Nations was primarily concerned with keeping the peace. Yet, as it evolved, it also

took on a key development role, though, critically, these were separated from the peacekeeping organs of the UN. Peacekeeping was entrusted to the Security Council which could, as it did in Korea, authorise the sending of troops to counter what it saw as serious threats to peaceful countries. Peace was also promoted through the influence in dispute resolution and negotiations that the Security Council could bring to bear. Where peace could not be secured immediately, agencies were entrusted with the task of providing relief for those suffering from conflict. Thus the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1951 and stood alongside organisation such as the Red Cross in helping the victims of conflict. A plethora of development agencies were formed under the UN's large umbrella. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were joined by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and a variety of smaller and specific agencies.

What was critical in the institutionalisation of the UN's peace and development work was that it worked on the assumption that, whilst peacekeeping and development were linked, they did not seem to overlap. The securing of peace was the first and most serious responsibility, then once a stable and legitimate government could be put in place, development agencies could follow and be charged with the task of eliminating poverty. Thus peacekeeping troops might work alongside the Red Cross or UNHCR staff, but development agencies would rarely step in until the troops had made life safe or even departed. Poverty alleviation, it seemed, could not come without the prior achievement of peace. And poverty alleviation, in turn, would prevent the re-occurrence of conflict.

This approach has provided a template for 50 years of international peace and development activity. It has been seen most recently in East Timor where a short military operation ensured the independence of the new state from Indonesia and, whilst troops remain to protect the peace, development agencies are now well represented in the field to address pressing development needs. There is a plan to establish a new democratic state and a hope that, in time, that state will be able to assume the development work by itself.

It is notable that this approach to development work has some parallels in development theory. Cowen and Shenton's work on the origins of 'doctrines of development' (1996) makes the distinction between 'intentional' and 'immanent' development. The former – our most common conception of the word – relates to planned interventions by the state (or other agencies) to shape and direct socio-economic change. The latter, on the other hand, was change that resulted inherent to the workings of capitalism, change which radically altered social structures, relationships and order as well as material standards of living. Cowen and Shenton argue that much intentional development, as during colonial rule, aimed to limit the destructive impacts of immanent development. Rural development (the 'agrarian doctrine of development') for example, aimed to provide some means of livelihood, by attaching rural smallholders to capital, and prevent proletarianisation and the mass exodus of people to the towns. In this sense, intentional development is conservative and reactionary process.

That conclusion accords with what might be seen as the UN-led approach to development. Its primary aim was the prevention of conflict and social disorder. It

was materialist and it had an implicit state-led or state-based concept of development practice. Development was, and is, seen as a rational, systematic and planned programme of intervention and improvement. This also neatly fits McMichael's (1996) notion of 'the development project' – an era between 1945 and about 1980 when nation-centred and state-led development, using Keynesian policy prescriptions and modernist universal strategies, dominated development practice (and theory).

Development in Conflict

But what about situations where peacekeeping fails and conflict continues? How can development take place in chaos, where there is intractable conflict, where state institutions are absent and where violence seems endemic? Furthermore, what is the future of development when the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy of many large agencies militates against the use of state-led strategies (Brohman 1995).

These questions come to mind in the work of Jonathan Andrews (1999), a UNHCR worker in Rwanda and eastern Congo who reflected on his work, the institution he worked for and the context of conflict. Andrews worked in refugee camps, helping to establish infrastructure and basic services. As long as international attention focused on the region, resources flowed in from agencies and the camps functioned adequately to provide the basic requirements of life. Yet, the prospects for the return of refugees to their former homes were minimal - the 'new' Rwanda was one that did not welcome many of its former residents. Similarly, Eastern Congo was a place where the existing local residents, whilst remarkably tolerant of the newcomers at first, did not relish the prospect of permanency for the refugees. Over time, especially after CNN no longer filed stories from the region, international attention waned. Andrews and his colleagues, against the wishes of their UNHCR superiors (for this was not part of the Commission's mission or funding), began a number of small local 'development' initiatives. They tried to develop partnerships with local communities to help build roads, improve water supplies and promote food cultivation. These showed promise and it was hoped they would continue but, following further violence and as his contract ended, Andrews was moved on to another trouble spot.

Such stories of endemic conflict but uneven international involvement are not uncommon. The expense of maintaining an international military presence means that troops pull out but development agencies are understandably wary in taking their place when their security is not guaranteed. In addition, the prospects for the establishment of effective governance by the local state are often slim.

They are slim because neoliberal models of development, favoured by the most powerful aid donors, trade-off external assistance for structural adjustment and the weakening of the economic and social roles of the state. It could be argued that, in terms of the Cowen and Shenton analysis, forms of intentional development (by international agencies rather than, hitherto, by national governments) are now being used not to prevent but to prepare the ground for further globalisation – for, in effect, immanent development. The state and its constituent communities will be increasingly unable to resist the sorts of economic and social transformations – 'progressive' and destructive – because of the very forms of development that have been initiated by development agencies. Out of conflict comes integration and dependency.

To return to the example of East Timor, there are some worrying signs for the future despite the apparent success both of military intervention and subsequent development work. The borders of East Timor may be secure but stability in surrounding regions of Indonesia is far from assured. In this context, there are likely to be external (let alone internal) threats to the new country for some time yet. And can the new state realistically be expected to assume the responsibility of development, especially as the key powerful international institutions behind its formation foresee – and advise - a country that will not follow an inward-looking socialist path but a neoliberal globally-oriented strategy? Development assistance from the global development industry to a new but inherently weak East Timorese state may well become a long-term feature of this country.

Re-Conceiving Development and Chaos

Thus, there is cause to re-evaluate our ideas about poverty, development, conflict and peace. Both peacekeeping and poverty alleviation are, of course, worthy forms of assistance that the international community can make to countries and peoples in need. In many cases, the existing models of ‘peace-first, development-next’ remain valid.

However, we need to recognise that they may be inadequate and even counter-productive in some circumstances and these circumstances may become more common in a neoliberal world. Development needs to be able to live with chaos. Development must not avoid – or follow - conflict but engage with conflict. This has implications for both practice and theory.

In terms of practice, our institutional structures may not serve us well. NGOs are flexible and more able to deal with multiple roles but large multilateral and government agencies seem to struggle with the complexity of peacekeeping, relief and development. Institutional separation (as, for example, between the Security Council, UNHCR and UNDP) may allow clarity of mission and management but it does not facilitate the sort of diverse and proactive strategies needed in situations such as Eastern Congo.

The work of institutions may also need to be reviewed. In East Timor, New Zealand military personnel are becoming involved in development work in local communities – something that their brief hardly included but which has seemed a natural aspect of their work. Perhaps we should see the military as a development agency and perhaps we in the development community should take steps to engage more with them. On the other hand, development agencies (especially UN and government) may need to consider widening their brief to include peacekeeping and peacemaking. This is more than just ‘doing development’, tackling poverty and hoping peace will follow but an active engagement in conflict resolution, advocacy and negotiation. It might also mean – uncomfortably –working in dangerous, chaotic places and, again, alongside (rather than in the wake of) troops.

The theoretical implications are also apparent. We need a better understanding of the relationships between conflict, poverty, development and the state. We should contemplate more circular and interconnected relationships rather than simple linear

transitions. This might also involve a more critical appreciation of conflict. Conflict is not simply a consequence of poverty (or ethnic rivalries or whatever), nor should it always be seen in a regressive and negative light. Immanent development, promoted by globalisation, is inevitably destructive. Socio-economic transformation and political restructuring under neoliberalism are accompanied by resistance and, often, social disorder and conflict. Development, in a sense then, is a cause as well as a solution to conflict and conflict may have to be seen as an inevitable, sometimes reactive but also progressive force – a reaction to weakened states and diminished autonomy and an attempt to rebuild locally-focused development.

References

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