

Changing criteria for development

How world leaders define development is tremendously influential in setting the goals which everyone strives for

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Editorial & Opinion



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Growing up in British India, my father learnt that Great Powers had certain special characteristics. For global influence, they had to have sea power which required indented coastlines and natural harbours, coal mines for energy, extensive telegraph cables for communications. Furthermore, they had to have a cold climate to make them hardy, and be isolated from the mainland so as to have natural defences against potential rivals and enemies. In light of these criteria, it would be obvious even to a child, that the UK was the sole and unrivalled leader of the world.

The 1930s editions of [ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA](#) did not even have an entry for the word 'democracy'. However, the emergence of the US as a world power changed everything. The First World War ruined European economies, leaving the US as the wealthiest. The winners redefined the criteria for development as being wealth alone. However, when certain oil-based economies with small populations overtook the US in GNP per capita, the criterion was revised to include an equitable income distribution. Later, when Switzerland and certain Scandinavian economies with good income distribution overtook the US, development theorists added the possession of infrastructure and natural resources. The gigantic US with its huge network of highways, dams, railroads, fertile agricultural land, etc. cannot be matched by the tiny European economies. But the point of this story is that the winners define the criteria for development, and ensure that the ongoing discourse acknowledges their leadership. To a much bigger extent than is commonly recognised, leadership and power are built upon structures of knowledge created by the powerful.

How world leaders define development is tremendously influential in setting the goals which everyone strives for. The British aristocrats preferred culture and philosophy, leaving technology to the working classes. Followers like [SIR SYED](#) established Aligarh

University which emphasised arts; engineering was added only 50 years later. With the rise of the Americans, wealth, which was considered crass by the British, gradually became the sole criterion for development. All over the world, countries are pursuing GNP per capita as the single-most important goal. We need to change this definition of development, which has caused tremendous harm to society and environment.

One of the greatest surprises to economists has been the Easterlin paradox — huge amounts of increasing levels of wealth have not led to corresponding increases in happiness. A book by Professor Richard Lane documents the “[LOSS OF HAPPINESS IN MARKET DEMOCRACIES](#)”. Studies of Happiness are re-discovering the ancient truths that money cannot buy love and friendship, and that social relationships are key components of happiness. Our development experience reinforces the need to change developmental paradigms. Mahbubul Haq implemented conventional growth policies in Pakistan and learnt that wealth does accumulate, but only in the hands of a select few. He then pioneered the [HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX](#) as a superior alternative. Followers like Amartya Sen have pursued the concept to argue that we should concentrate on development of human capabilities. Taking this idea seriously would create radical changes in our approach to development.

Every human life is unique and infinitely precious. All babies are born with amazing potential, with capabilities to astonish the whole world. Our job as a society is to nurture these capabilities and provide an environment which allows them to come to fruition, instead of crushing them beneath the burden of economic deprivations. All our planning, resources and our institutional structures must be adapted towards the achievement of this goal. As a society, we must take collective responsibility to ensure that all children have the chance to achieve their potential. This is radically different from the current view of human beings as a resource to be used for the production of wealth. Education is designed to remove all irregularities and uniqueness, so as to allow the human cogs to fit together well, as interchangeable parts, to be plugged into the capitalist machine for the production of wealth. Shifting the target of our efforts to human development requires building social capital and empowering of communities. The greatest obstacle in our path is a top-down bureaucratic mindset which insists on centralised planning and control. We must learn to ‘trust people daringly’. Engaging citizens is a game-changer in the development process.

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