WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

INTRODUCTION

Development: “a specified state of growth or advancement; a new and advanced product or idea; an event constituting a new stage in a changing situation.” (Oxforddictionaries.com). All are definitions of development but when we talk of international development more meaning is implied. This briefing explores definitions and perspectives of development and explains how it is different from aid.

DEFINING DEVELOPMENT

Development is not the same as aid

Aid is the transfer of resources from one place to another. By its nature, it goes in one direction only, often from the North to the South. For example, when there is a natural disaster or a war, people are in need of immediate basic resources such as food, water and medical care. Aid may be sent in the form of money, equipment, medical staff, food, clothing or similar. However, aid is for immediate relief, but doesn’t often contribute to long term rebuilding or recovery. On a smaller scale, money sent by diasporas to their families in countries of origin to cover costs of living may be considered aid. Development on the other hand is more complex, as explored below.

Meanings of ‘development’

Development is ‘Good change’ according to Chambers (1997), but this is not as straightforward as it sounds. For example, who decides which change is good? Thomas (2000) explains three ways the word ‘development’ is used.

• DEVELOPMENT AS A VISION: a vision or description of how desirable a society is. The Visions of Development briefing explores these further.

• DEVELOPMENT AS A HISTORICAL PROCESS: social change that takes place over long periods of time due to inevitable processes. For example, arguments have been made that both capitalism and communism are unavoidable results of progress.

• DEVELOPMENT AS ACTION: deliberate efforts to change things for the better. For example, providing food aid to alleviate hunger.
Development has a history of being linked with capitalism (see the History of development briefing) with ‘Good Change’ commonly associated with industrialisation and modernisation on the basis of free markets. Therefore, development is closely bound with ideologies and values which are explored in the next section. Beliefs about definitions of development shape the assumptions, values, actions, processes and aims of organisations and institutions (their theories of change).

**VIEWS OF ‘DEVELOPMENT’**

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<th>PERSPECTIVE</th>
<th>VIEWS OF DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<td>Neoliberalism</td>
<td>A capitalist perspective – no development action is needed except to have free markets. The resulting perpetual economic growth will ‘trickle down’ so everyone benefits. Neoliberalists see history as the result of individual rational actions.</td>
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<td>Structuralism</td>
<td>The state is in control - history is the result of political and economic struggles. Development is mostly the responsibility of the state and aims for a modern industrial society.</td>
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<td>Interventionism</td>
<td>A perspective that recognises there are losers as well as winners of capitalist progress. Development action tries to help the ‘losers’. More recently, a concern of the negative impacts of capitalist growth on the environment has been considered. In some cases intervention is to remove barriers to modernisation, in others it is to influence the direction of change.</td>
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<td>People centred/alternative</td>
<td>This is based on the belief that all humans can reach their potential. Development involves empowering groups and individuals to make their own choices. Individuals and social movements are the agents of change.</td>
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<td>Post development</td>
<td>This perspective argues that development is not a good thing – in this view development agencies and governments use ‘doing good’ as an excuse to maintain power and control.</td>
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FINAL THOUGHTS

It’s easy to discuss international development without further thinking about what it means. As this briefing shows, it has multiple meanings.

- Which view of development do you most identify with?
- Who should be in the driving seat of development? Governments, civil society, private sector or some combination?
- Does growth ‘trickle down’ to the poorest in society?
- Who are the winners and losers of development you have seen or been involved in?
- Does development promote or undermine efforts for positive social change?
- Does development help to maintain current power structures? Think about how trends in development were linked to the Cold War, and now to the ‘wars on terror’ in the Middle East.
- How do you decide what change is ‘good’?
- Who should decide the type and vision of development?

FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

