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Introduction to the concept of Social Development

Introduction

This chapter elucidates the concept social development and in order to do this, it firstly traces the evolution of the thinking pertaining to social development around the world. The chapter first begins by examining the idea of social change and how it is generally understood in the developed north. Thereafter, it critiques the ethnocentric appraisals of development which were inspired primarily by Western development theories, such as the modernisation theory. In proposing solutions to developing countries’ socio-economic challenges, such theories had not taken into critical account the former’s socio-cultural and historical conditions. This oversight ultimately led to the implementation of development strategies which were not in synch with the realities obtained in the developing world. In this regard, the modernisation school of thought is brought forward for scrutiny. After this, the chapter unpacks the meaning of development and also links it to the forces that gave rise to development thinking in general and social development in particular. In the process, the role of the United Nations Organisation is duly considered, especially in the way it was able and continues to “globalise” development discourse and tilt it in the favour of the developing world. The chapter makes use of an historical analysis in order to show how social development was arrived at and also how its conceptualisation has shifted over the decades. Lastly, the chapter links social development to the wider perspectives of development and concludes the discussion by arriving at a definition of social development.

Social change and development

At the centre of the development debate is the idea of social change and how it impacts on societies. Social change has been associated with thinkers and scholars’ efforts to understand how societies transformed. Thinking around social change is as old as humanity itself. Social historians have shown that the Greek philosophers wrote extensively about social change and that, before them, ideas about social change emerged within the myths, legends and religions of the ancient civilisations. For example, the ancient Chinese had well-developed beliefs about social change. In Chinese culture, change was viewed as a never-ending process of cycles (Midgley, 1995). Social change is common to all societies. Its nature, pattern, and causation are linked to certain historical and societal conditions located in time and space which forms its framework. The material and subjective factors are shaped by the socio-historical circumstances of a particular society. Each of the material and subjective factors develops relative autonomy in influencing the pattern of change. That, however, comes into play at a particular historical juncture
(Singh & Bal, 1996, p. 1). For the social sciences, it can be said, however, that the systematic investigation into how societies changed were instigated by early sociologists such as August Compte. In these early times social scientists had likened societies to organisms. To them society also evolved in different stages just as an organism up to the point of maturation. The philosophers of social change in Europe and North America tended to build models of society by taking into consideration micro issues perceived as common to all human societies since the nineteenth century. What was regarded as logically necessary was defined by emphasising one or the other element of society as crucial for society. Of all such characterisations, the most important is the distinction between facts and values (Singh & Bal, 1996).

**Modernisation theory**

The sociologists and political scientists of European or for that matter American origin used the word “modernisation” in a way that did not confine it to the updating of technology, but extended it to societal organisations, political institutions and normative frameworks. However, this conceptualisation was based on Euro-American experiences. In a way, these social scientists provided Euro-American institutions as ideal-typical models which they prescribed to the developing countries for adoption (Singh & Bal, 1996). Hence, the driving force behind this “modernising project” was the modernisation theory which was strictly adhered to in the 1950s and early 1960s in the south at the behest of the north. Modernisation theory is bipolar in outlook as it posits two contexts, namely, the **traditional society** and **modern society**. Modernisation theory presupposes that “backward” or “traditional societies” have to follow the same trajectories as Western nations in order to become developed. It picks up from the biological sciences of 18th Century Europe that likened human society to biological organisms, as mentioned earlier. Hence, the functionalist school of thought dominates in modernisation theory. Traditional traits were said to hamper development in these “backward” nations. Among the features of modern societies worthy of imitation were an extensive division of labour, a well-functioning and active state apparatus, a democratic form of government and equality before the law (Martinussen, 1997). Modernisation theorists saw development as an evolutionary process going through various stages and transforming all societies from “traditional” to modern. The number of stages varied from one scholar to another: Hoselitz referred to two, **traditional** and **modern**; Lerner added an intermediary third, **transitional stage**. Parsons extended the number of stages to five, and so did Rostow with his well-publicised stages of **traditional**, **pre-take-off**, **take-off**, **the road to maturity** and **the society of mass consumption** (George, 1988, p. 5).

Rostow set out proposals for modernising “Third World” countries as both a blue-print for economic growth and as a capitalist alternative to the state planned model on offer from the Soviet Union and communist China. His theory of modernisation was therefore much a part of the ideological battle between East and West to win over the countries of the “Third World” as it was
an exercise in theory and policy (Slattery, 2003). Rostow argues that it is possible to identify all societies, in their economic dimensions as lying within one of the aforementioned five stages. In regard to the traditional society, for example, Rostow (1991, p. 4) notes:

A traditional society is one whose structure is developed within limited production functions, based on pre-Newtonian science and technology, and on pre-Newtonian attitudes towards the physical world. Newton is here used as a symbol for that watershed in history when men came widely to believe that the external world was subject to a few knowable laws, and was systematically capable of productive manipulation.

What can be discerned from the foregoing description of development is that it was mainly equated with economic development. Hence, the economic aspects of development were heavily stressed on as opposed to the social dimensions of development in this era. The dominance of the economic perspectives of development were further cemented by the neo-classical school of economics which focused strongly on letting the markets navigate the course of human progress with the understanding that unfettered markets would redistribute goods and services to the society in a “trickle-down” manner. Neo-classical economics had a variety of technical meanings as its central problem: the mechanics utility, price determination, or operation of the price mechanism; the working of the free enterprise system; the operation of pure markets; the mechanics of pure theory or logic of choice; constrained maximisation decision-making; the allocation of resources; and so on (Henry, 1990).

In summing up this section it is fitting to re-visit Baster’s views on this matter:

Development and modernisation have been interpreted as a unilinear movement between the two ideal-types, with the highly industrialised western country at the one end, and the traditional agricultural society at the other. The sociology of development then becomes a question of identifying and analysing the social, cultural, and psychological changes associated with economic development and industrialisation in terms of such dimensions as social values (commonly oriented values versus individualistic achievement values), social organisation (extended family versus nuclear family), occupational structures, social class and social mobility, urbanisation, communication. This suggests a particular set of relatively conventional dimensions and indicators of social change (1972, p. 9).

Modernisation theory challenged
There arose a different group of scholars who began to challenge the hegemonic hold of the modernisation theory on development thinking and practice. Some of them were from the emerging newly independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There was disquiet relating to the inability of this theory to properly contextualise the experiences of the countries of the developing world. The efficacy of such a theory to bring to light the unequal terms of trade and the negative effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism, for example, was seriously questioned. One school of thought that rose to prominence was the Dependency School of Thought or Dependencia. Dependency theory critiqued modernisation theory by positing a different global scenario where "core" sections of the world exploited the "peripheries". This is one of the best-known neo-Marxist development theories of the 1960s. Paul Baran (in the late 1950s), Andre Gunder Frank (in the 1960s), and the structuralist writings of the Latin American economists working with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in Santiago, Chile, in the early 1960s are associated with this school of thought. They saw developing countries as being stuck in their stage of underdevelopment as a result of their structural exploitation by the industrialised countries. Therefore, developing countries provided the rich countries with both raw materials and export markets at very favourable trade terms. These analysts saw the spread of capitalism from the north as having a deleterious effect on countries of the south. Also, capitalism in the wealthier or core countries was seen as actively underdeveloping poorer or periphery countries. Other scholars such as Walter Rodney (1972) were able to systematically show how Europe had actually underdeveloped Africa by following this process through the mercantile era (and the period of primitive accumulation), the transatlantic slave trade; colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism.

**What then is development?**

There are many definitions and interpretations of the term development. "Development" is inevitably a normative concept, almost a synonym for improvement (Seers, 1972). In the early days, development theory (as well as the idea of development) was taken as a special field applicable to the low-income countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, as developing countries became more differentiated, it became clear that different principles apply to different countries. Also, it was found that principles initially thought to apply only to developing countries, applied to the whole world community: to advanced and developing countries alike (Streeten, 1995). In order to arrive at conceptual clarity it is pertinent that some definitions of development are brought to the fore. For starters, Seers (1972) observes that development means creating the conditions for the realisation of human personality. Its evaluation must therefore take into account three linked economic criteria: whether there has been a reduction in (i) poverty; (ii) unemployment; (iii) inequality. In this definition Seers does not endorse the position which equates development to economic development. He actually questions why people
confuse development with economic growth. The great Caribbean economist and Nobel Prize winner Arthur Lewis defined development as the enlargement of people’s choices. Following him the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report chose the same definition (Streeten, 2008).

For purposes of this discussion the definition of Amartya Sen (1999) will be adopted. He describes development in terms of human capabilities and sees it as a bundle of freedoms. He distinguishes five types of freedoms: (i) political freedoms, (ii) economic facilities, (iii) social opportunities, (iv) transparency guarantees, and (v) protective security. Development is then achieved through the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, and neglect of public services and the machinery of repression (Sen, 1999). In addition, it is also important that public policy fosters human capabilities and substantive freedoms in general, as well as working through the promotion of these distinct, but interrelated instrumental freedoms. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the journey has not been easy - from the time development was seen in purely economic terms to now when the social dimensions of development are seriously considered in policy and planning endeavours, for example. In some quarters there are still some who still think that economic development is the end point and not a means to human well-being:

Many economists have only been sensitised to the fact that development involves many factors other than income as conventionally measured, and that among the causes of economic and human development are many influences that are deeply intertwined with patterns of living, patterns of social interaction and modes of governance in the economic, social and political spheres, and that the latter in turn are often shaped by geography, history and ecology (Bagchi, 2008, p. 27).

It is worth mentioning the fact that the United Nations has been at the forefront of spearheading efforts aimed at arriving at definitions, theoretical positions and practices of development which are amenable to the circumstances of developing countries and which are anchored in their socio-political, economic and historical conditions.

The first and second United Nations decades of development (the 1960s and the 1970s)

In January 1961, the United Nations declared the decade of the 1960s as the decade of development. As African countries unshackled themselves from colonial bondage and became independent, there was a heightened sense of optimism around the world. Even developing countries set their own targets of at least minimum annual economic growth of 5 per cent in aggregate national
income by the end of the decade. On the other hand, the developed countries were also implored to pursue policies which would enable the developing countries to sell their products at stable and remunerative prices. On 24 October 1970 the Second Development Decade was proclaimed by the United Nations. On this twenty fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, Governments dedicated themselves anew to the fundamental objectives enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations to create conditions of stability and well-being and ensure a minimum standard of living consistent with human dignity through economic and social progress and development. The United Nations Decades of Development also again allowed the economic hegemony in development discourse to be challenged through new development theories. Two examples will be touched on in this discussion.

(a) The basic needs approach

This theory redefined the aims of development towards fostering fairer distributions of income and resources, encouraging local participation and promoting small-scale projects employing socially and environmentally appropriate technologies (Brohman, 1996). According to this International Labour Organisation (ILO) framework, an equitable distribution of income increases the demand for basic consumer goods that are produced by labour-intensive techniques: this would lead to more employment, more use of appropriate technologies and local resources, and less requirements for imports. Taken further:

In general, there are four components constituting the basic needs approach: (a) certain minimum necessities related to household consumption such as food, shelter, and clothing; (b) some essential services provided by the community such as sanitation, safe drinking-water, transport, and basic health; (c) the provision of ensuring adequate employment; and (d) the opportunity for participating in decision-making. Realising the inadequacy of economic growth policies to address the immediate needs of the poor, the proponents of this basic needs approach emphasise the redistribution of income to the lower-income groups in accordance with their basic needs regardless of the situation of economic growth (Haque, 1999, p. 87).

(b) The Human Development Approach

This theory was propagated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and was published in its first Human Development Report in 1990. The UNDP report reminds us that: “People are the real wealth of a nation” and goes on to point out that the basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate
concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth (UNDP, 1990). Furthermore:

Technical considerations of the means to achieve human development - and the use of statistical aggregates to measure national income and its growth - have at times obscured the fact that the primary objective of development is to benefit people. There are two reasons for this. First, national income figures, useful though they are for many purposes, do not reveal the composition of income or the real beneficiaries. Second, people often value achievements that do not show up at all, or not immediately, in higher measured income or growth figures: better nutrition and health services, greater access to knowledge, more secure livelihoods, better working conditions, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, and a sense of participating in the economic, cultural and political activities of their communities (UNDP, 1990, p. 9).

It is also important to cast light on some of the major initiatives that were driven by the United Nations which also lent credence to the social dimensions of development and gave rise to social development theory and practice, especially in the developing world. The former are listed below:

I. The Summit of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare in 1968

In 1968, the first International Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare was held under the auspices of the United Nations in order to: (a) reach across national boundaries and assess the status of social welfare in the countries of the world; (b) to gain a new understanding of the potential of social welfare; and (c) to chart a new course for social welfare in the broad movement towards the fuller realisation of human potential. Among the most significant accomplishments of the conference were the recognition and emphasis it gave to the concept of developmental social welfare (United Nations, 1986). According to this perspective, social welfare shares equal status with other sectors of the economy in the march towards social progress and development. Also, it is predicated on the maximisation of human potential and based on the mobilisation of all segments of the population for the resolution of social problems and attainment of social progress. Developmental social welfare generally emphasises change, partnership, justice, and the development of human potential in place of condescension, passive provision, segregation and negative labelling of needy individuals and groups (United Nations, 1986). Decades later, scholars such as Midgley (1995) would follow through and augment earlier conceptualisations of social development by the United Nations. According to Midgley (1995) social development offers a comprehensive macro-perspective that focuses on
communities and societies emphasises planned intervention, promotes a dynamic change-oriented approach which is inclusive and universalistic, and above all seeks to harmonise social interventions and economic development efforts.

II. The Brundtland Commission 1987

The above-mentioned which was also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development sought to galvanise the countries of the world, for the first time, around the objective of attaining sustainable development. In defining sustainable development it can be argued that it seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, it recognises that the problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits (United Nations, 1987). Furthermore, it is important to note that economic growth always brings risk of environmental damage, as it puts increased pressure on environmental resources. But policymakers, guided by the concept of sustainable development, will necessarily have to work in order to assure that growing economies remain firmly attached to their ecological roots and that these roots are protected and nurtured so that they may support growth over the long term. Environmental protection is thus inherent in the concept of sustainable development, as is a focus on the sources of environmental problems rather than the symptoms (United Nations, 1987). In later years, the United Nations pursued other initiatives which aimed to protect the world’s resources and environment. These were the Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa. In South Africa, sustainable development was reaffirmed as a central component of the international agenda with a wide range of targets and concrete commitments for action to implement sustainable development objectives agreed to by governments. Recently, the United Nations completed a climate summit on 23 September 2014 which was meant to raise world action around the global challenge of climate change. It can be seen that these summits have helped to draw attention to the question of development and how it is supposed to result in a more equitable world.

III. The Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (6-12 March 1995)

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2000) reports that at the World Summit for Social Development, held in March 1995 in Copenhagen, Governments reached a new consensus on the need to put people at the centre of development. The Social Summit was the largest gathering ever of world leaders at that time. It pledged to make the conquest of poverty, the goal of full employment and the fostering of social integration overriding objectives of development. Five years later, they reconvened in Geneva in June 2000, to review what had been achieved, and to commit themselves to new initiatives. The World Summit and its Programme of Action
constituted the basic framework for the promotion of social development for countries: at the national and international levels. The former, among other issues, recognised that social development is central to the needs and aspirations of people throughout the world and to the responsibilities of governments and all sectors of civil society. It also affirmed that, in both economic and social terms, the most productive policies and investments are those that empower people so as to maximise their capacities, resources and opportunities. Furthermore, social development and social justice were taken as indispensable factors necessary for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security among nations. The Summit also linked social development to poverty eradication, employment generation, and social harmony.

IV. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with a target of 2015, form a blueprint agreed to by all of the world’s countries and leading development institutions. The MDGs have galvanised unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest (United Nations, 2005). Specifically they aim to:

- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day.
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.
- Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five.
- Reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio.
- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases (United Nations, 2005).

In a way, the MDGs are pushing governments to adopt public management systems that show results (Imas & Rist, 2009). For example, in their MDG country reports countries are made to at least show how they tried to meet certain targets and also whether they managed to meet earlier set goals.

It is noteworthy that social development emerged from the history just described above. In the next section a definition of social development will be proffered.

Unpacking Social Development
Again, just as it was shown in the case of development, it can be pointed out that the concept social development has a long history and seems to have globally gained momentum, especially after the end of the Second World War. This period signalled the onset of some far-reaching global trends and developments such as: the creation of the United Nations Organisation; the reconstruction of Europe and birth of the European Welfare State, the onset of the Cold War, and the beginning of the decolonisation of the colonies of imperial Europe in both Asia and Africa. This was also the period when the concept of development was beginning to be seriously interrogated by various scholars and bodies such as the United Nations, as earlier intimated. One of the key issues for countries of the south or developing nations was the drive by the developed north through agencies such as the World Bank or the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to “modernise” countries of the south through planned interventions. In both the West and the new communist bloc, development was seen as hinging on economic growth and industrialisation. The latter group of countries believed in central planning which was exemplified by five year plans. It seemed as if at the time such statist planning brought material well-being to the then Soviet Union and its satellite states. With the foregoing developments unfolding, the newly independent nations of the south were now being made to follow similar pathways as the West by multilateral development organisations, such as the World Bank if they had to “catch up”. There were frantic efforts to “develop” “Third World” countries through the process of modernisation. Hence, the erection of modern infrastructure, such as huge dams and paved roads or the discarding of “regressive” traditional belief systems and the pursuit of modern education were regarded as the surest means for the developing world to “catch-up” with the West or even the communist countries.

Key concepts associated with Social Development

A. Capabilities:

Capabilities are for all citizens so that people would have the required economic, social and political freedoms to lead the type of life they have reason to value. These should also result in people having a decent life. Capabilities such as being adequately nourished (nutrition), educated (basic education) and able to avoid common and preventable illnesses (primary health-care) (Alexander, 2008) are central to social development theory.

B. Assets:

These are accumulated resources that are invested for social and economic development. The investment can be in human, social, or tangible assets, most often in education, homeownership, and small business development (Centre for Social Development, 2014). Assets change the way people think and interact with the world. With assets, people begin to think in the long-term and pursue long-term goals. For example, while incomes feed people’s stomachs, assets change their heads (Sherraden, 1991).
C. Empowerment:
This refers to a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organisations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice (Wallerstein, 1992).

D. Strengths:
The foregoing refer to people focusing on strengths, abilities and potential rather than problems, deficits and pathologies. An essential assumption of the strengths perspective is that every person has an inherent power that may be characterised as life force, transformational capacity, life energy, spirituality, regenerative potential, and healing power - which is a potent form of knowledge that can guide personal and social transformation (Weick, 1992).

E. Social capital:
This is defined as the norms, shared understandings, trust and other factors that make collective action feasible and productive. Social capital enables members of a neighbourhood or social network to help one another, especially in terms of economic opportunity and social mobility (Green & Haines, 2012).

Towards a definition
Midgley, (2014) rightly observes that the different approaches defining social development reflect the diverse normative beliefs of scholars and practitioners. They also reveal the rich diversity of ideas that find expression in social development theory and practice today. However, these definitions prioritise different types of interventions and, accordingly, no single, agreed-upon definition has yet emerged. Hence, due to its broad nature social development can be defined as: a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole within the context of a dynamic multifaceted development process (Midgley, 2014). This author goes on to flesh out the various facets of social development in the following manner:

(a) Firstly, social development invokes the notion of process - its dynamic nature and its focus on transformative change should be stressed.

(b) Second, the process of social change in social development is progressive in nature.

(c) Third, social development process forms a part of a larger multifaceted process comprised of economic, social, political, cultural environmental, gender and other dimensions which are integrated and harmonised (Midgley, 2014).

(d) Fourth, the process of social development is interventionist in that it requires human agency in the form of projects, programmes, policies and plans that achieve social development goals. Social development interventions are also implemented on different levels, including the household, community, regional and national levels.
(e) Fifth, the social development process is productivist in that particular interventions that practice interventions function as investments that contribute positively to economic development. Because they are based on social investments, they generate rates of return on the individuals, households and communities that benefit from these investments as well as to the wider society.

(f) Sixth, social development is universalistic in scope, being concerned with the population as a whole, rather than impoverished, vulnerable and needy groups of people. It also seeks to promote people’s participation in development.

(g) Lastly, social development is committed to the goal of promoting people’s social well-being. The notion of social well-being requires that social needs be met, problems managed and opportunities maximised for families, communities and societies (Midgley, 2014, pp. 13-17).

As Midgley (2014) aptly observes there are many definitions to social development and in ending this paper, it will also be prudent for this discussion to also bring forth another definition of social development which will augment the one which has been proffered above. This definition is adapted from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD, 2011, p. 2) which refers to social development in the following manner:

UNRISD adopts a broad definition of social development - one that is concerned with processes of change that lead to improvements in human well-being, social relations and social institutions, and that are equitable, sustainable, and compatible with principles of democratic governance and social justice. The definition emphasizes social relations, institutional arrangements and political processes that are central to efforts to achieve desirable development outcomes. It includes material achievements, such as good health and education, and access to the goods and services necessary for decent living; and social, cultural and political achievements, such as a sense of security, dignity, the ability to be part of a community through social and cultural recognition, and political representation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter’s task was to define the concept social development. In doing so, it needed to first look at the broader term of development and then define it. In the process the notion of social change was also examined and it was discovered that past definitions which were advanced by European and North American scholars were Eurocentric in content and outlook. The chapter then spent some time tracing the evolution of the United Nations’ thinking around development from earlier decades to present times. What came to light after this exercise was that the United Nations has promoted the global development agenda in such a way that it brought on board the concerns of those voiceless parts of the globe, especially communities in developing
countries. The chapter had also attempted to define the broad term of
development and then endeavoured to arrive at a definition of social
development. In ending this chapter, it must be stated that issues revolving
around development and social development are complex and must not be
trivialised by those who see themselves as the “custodians” of the ordinary
masses. What is also clear from the foregoing discussions is the fact that
development cannot be transplanted from one context to another. The local
conditions are very crucial in the development equation and should not be
overlooked.

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