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Some reflections on the concept of 'development'

By Aram Ziai (Senior Researcher, ZEF A)

Abstract:

From a poststructuralist perspective tracing the relation between words and meanings, the paper discusses the implicit assumptions of the concept of 'development'. It argues that the concept has Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications which can not easily be eliminated by simply redefining it in a progressive manner. The paper also explores the productive misunderstandings arising from the different definitions of 'development' and the potential alternative concepts development researchers might be using instead.

Keywords:

Development theory, discourse analysis, poststructuralism

'Development research is important. It helps to solve development problems and thus to fight poverty.' (ZEF news nr. 23, editorial, February 2011)

Working at the Center for Development Research, it seems worthwhile to give a thought or two to the question what 'development' actually is – where the concept originates, who defines it, what its functions and implications are. Of course, we are confronted with 'development' all the time: engaging in projects, attending conferences, teaching courses, giving lectures, writing articles concerned with the concept and its implementation. Yet often in our daily routine we lack the time to pause and reflect on our work and the terminology with which we describe it. This working paper provides an occasion for such reflections.

The paper discusses the usage of the concept of 'development' in development policy and research[1] and its effects. It argues that there are good reasons for giving up the concept of 'development' and replacing it with various other concepts. However, this should not be misunderstood as a call to dismiss all practices which aim at improving the human condition. Yet there is no need to identify these practices with the term 'development'. On the contrary, as numerous practices which have definitely not improved the human condition have been carried out in the name of 'development', it might be a good idea to reject this connection. The paper argues that these negative phenomena should not be seen as an abuse of a positive concept, but as linked to certain Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications of the concept of 'development'.

In the first section, the paper will lay out the theoretical background of the argument and answer the question why it should be important to consider which concepts are being used in development policy and research. After all, 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me'. Thus, the relevance of discourse and discourse analysis needs to be established. The second section deals with the concept of 'development' in the social scientific literature. In the following section I will then argue that we need to rethink our central concepts because 'development' has Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications. The fourth section will then deal with the hypothetical and actual attempts to redefine the concept – and with their limits. Subsequently, the fifth section analyses the numerous misunderstandings which result also from these frequent redefinitions. The final section will then try to answer the pressing question of what other concepts can be employed.

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[1] The paper is concerned with social scientific development research, not development research taking place in biology, psychology or pedagogics.

1. Theoretical background: The relevance of discourse

Since the establishment of the linguistic turn in the social sciences, few scholars would still maintain that language merely mirrors an objective reality which is there for all to see. In everyday life, the question of how language represents our reality becomes apparent when different people see different things although they observe the same event: are the combatants of the Hamas (of the Farc, of the EZLN, of the PKK, of the LTTE, etc.) 'freedom fighters' or 'terrorists'? Are the military attacks of US forces in Libya (in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Yugoslavia, in Somalia) an 'imperialist war' or a 'humanitarian intervention'? Of course, one might give definitions and criteria and reasonable arguments, but the decisive point is that it makes a fundamental difference whether we describe reality in one way or another and neither of them can legitimately claim to be the only correct and objective way. As a consequence of our perception, some political actions will appear as legitimate, and others as illegitimate or even criminal. In development research, the same pattern applies when we classify China (Brazil, India, South Africa, …) as a 'regional power' or a 'developing country'. Language constructs our reality, and the specific way in which it does so has consequences.

Not entering into theoretical debates and differences here (see Keller 2005, Diaz-Bone et al. 2007, Wodak/Meyer 2009), the term 'discourse' usually denotes a structure in the way reality (or a certain aspect of it) is constructed through language. Building on poststructuralism (which itself is based on structural linguistics) (Münker/Roesler 2000, Belsey 2002) the smallest unit in language is the sign, and the sign is composed of the signifier (e.g. the word 'tree') and the signified (the large thing with twigs and leaves under whose shadow we can read romantic poems and get stung by bees). According to structural linguistics, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary (in other language systems, different words are used), and the sign carries meaning as a result of differences between the signifiers ('tree' is different from 'bee' and 'sea'). Thus our access to reality is only through language, through systems of representation in which certain signifiers are linked to certain signifieds.

Now poststructuralism maintains that these systems that structural linguistics talks of are by no means unambiguous, discreet and stable. On the contrary, they are sometimes ambiguous and allow for misunderstandings, they cannot be easily delineated, and each relation between signifier and signified is inherently unstable and has to be reproduced continuously. Thus, discourses can be described as systems of relations between words (signifiers) and things (signifieds) which construct a topic in a certain way. They provide certain statements, images and arguments. Following Foucault (1972, 1980), they possess certain rules on what can be said and regarded as true and are linked with institutionalised knowledge production and relations of power.

This poststructuralist perspective implies a post-positivist stance in terms of meta-theory or philsophy of science, that is, the positivist principles of objectivism (value neutral knowledge is possible, separation between fact and value and subject and object in research), empiricism (knowledge is based in empirical matters only and empirical testing of hypotheses is the only valid way of generating knowledge) and naturalism (just like the natural sciences, social science should aim to describe, explain and predict reality through universal laws) are rejected. The methodological consequence is that this paper is predominantly confined to the meta-theoretical level while being compatible with different theoretical perspectives. (For the problems of post-positivist empirical research, see Ziai 2010.) The argument proceeds by reviewing the literature and discussing the concept of development, it does not seek to establish whether one or the other construction of reality can be empirically verified but primarily explores their political implications.

2. The concept of development

For reasons of space, only a cursory and incomplete review of the literature on the concept of development will be provided here. While most surveys on the history of development theory begin in the mid-20th century, a broader perspective proves to be illuminating and allows to draw parallels to earlier conceptions of political economy (see Martinussen 1997, Chang 2003) or social philosphy (Kößler 1998). A thorough examination of these predecessors (Ziai 2004) yields that development theory has two roots: 19th century evolutionism (and earlier philosphies of history) (Nisbet 1969) and 19th century social technology (building on Enlightenment philosophy and designed to reconcile order and progress in the face of the problems caused by industrial capitalism) (Cowen/Shenton 1996). Evolutionism assumed that social change in societies proceeds according to a universal pattern (usually in historical stages), while social technology claimed that social interventions based on expert knowledge (possessed by a privileged group that acts as a trustee for the common good) are necessary to achieve positive social change. Both roots can be found in 20th century development theory, which is as often a 'description of ongoing self-propelled processes of social change' as it is a 'blueprint for action' (Cooper/Packard 1997: 8). In a more critical vein, Alcalde (1987: 223), concerning the rise of the idea of Third World development during the first half of the 20th century, comments on the actual usage of the term and argues that the 'first and broadest function of the idea of development was to give economic activity, particularly foreign economic activity, a positive and essential meaning for the lives of less-developed peoples'.

This critical perspective on 'development' was the trade mark of the so-called Post-Development school in development theory (see above all Esteva 1987, Sachs 1992, Escobar 1995, Rahnema 1997, for the debate see Ziai 2004, 2007). Whereas earlier critiques of development theory and policy were usually focusing on inadequacies and shortcomings which prevented the achievement of 'development' in the South, Post-Development launched a fundamental critique which rejected the entire paradigm (and not only 'capitalist development') and denounced 'development' as a 'myth' (Esteva) or an 'ideology' (Rahnema). Post-Development and other approaches related to, inspired by or critical of it subsequently engaged in analysing the discourse of development (Ferguson 1994; Marglin/Apffel-Marglin 1990, 1996; Nandy 1988; Alvares 1992; Crush 1995; Moore/Schmitz 1995; Cowen/Shenton 1996; Cooper/Packard 1997; Mosse 2005; Murray Li 2007, Cornwall/Eade 2011), that is, they were primarily interested in the question how a particular way of speaking and thinking about social change in African, Asian and Latin American societies had certain origins and effects and was linked to relations of power.

But is it really possible to talk about the discourse of development in the singular? Are there not vast differences between approaches inspired by modernisation theory or by dependency writers, proponents of balanced or unbalanced growth, export orientation or import substitution, capitalist or socialist development? Of course there are. But there are a number of assumptions and discursive regularities shared by very different perspectives on development theory and policy. Four of them can be termed core assumptions, for they form the basis of nearly everything that is written and spoken on the topic. These are:

1. The existential assumption: There is such a thing as 'development', i.e. 'development' functions as an organising and conceptual frame. An organising frame, because the term allows the linking of diverse social, economic, political and cultural phenomena to a single process of 'development'. In the words of Foucault, it allows 'to group a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organising principle, to subject them to the exemplary power of life... to discover, already at work in each beginning, a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity' (Foucault 1972: 22). A conceptual frame, because the term allows us to make sense of diverse social, economic, political and cultural phenomena, to interpret them as manifestations of 'development' and 'underdevelopment'. The concept makes the 'images of the ragged poor of Asia [or other continents] ... legible as

markers of a stage of development. ... Within this problematic, it appears self-evident that debtor Third World nation-states and starving peasants share a common 'problem', that both lack a single 'thing': 'development'.' (Ferguson 1994: xiii) In fact, the continuing debt crisis of many states in the South and the chronic hunger prevalent in many rural areas in the South may both be somehow linked to relations of power in the global political economy, but on a concrete level have quite different causes.

2. The normative assumption: 'development' is a good thing. Although rarely made explicit, the assumption is ubiquitous in development policy. 'Development' denotes the state of a good society or the process leading to it, which is why Chambers (1997) rephrased it as 'good change'. As a consequence, stagnation is seen as bad, a good society can be achieved only through change and progress.

3. The practical assumption: 'development' can be achieved. Not only that 'development' should be realised all over the world, it is assumed that it is possible to be realised all over the world. The normative and the practical assumption together constitute the foundation of the entire 'development business' – institutions, experts, projects, etc.

4. The methodological assumption: units (states) can be compared according to their 'development'. Units of analysis are usually geographically and politically separated entities: states (sometimes also continents or regions). The possibility of comparison implies that there is a universal scale on which 'development' can be measured, leading to the identification of 'developed' and 'less developed' (or 'underdeveloped' or 'developing') units.

These assumptions are, however, quite abstract. They determine that there are developed and less developed countries, but not which ones. They determine that 'development' should be achieved, but not what it looks like and how this can be done. Additional assumptions were necessary, and they are to be found in the classical paradigm of development which was dominant from the 1950s to the 1970s and still is very influential. The most prominent of these concrete assumptions are:

1. The specification of the goal: the industrialised countries of North America and Europe are 'developed'. Other countries, specifically those of Asia, Africa and Latin America, are 'less developed'. These countries of the global South need 'development'.

2. The specification of the process: the countries of the global South need economic growth, industrialisation and modernisation in order to become 'developed'. Therefore, specific interventions (also interventions in the market mechanism) are necessary to help them which usually consist in the transfer of capital, technology and knowledge from the North.

3. The legitimation of the process: These interventions ('development' projects and programmes) are based on expert knowledge on how to further 'development', how to attain a good society and improve the lives of the people. Therefore, they are legitimate.

Other assumptions contain further specifications and details, e.g. that 'development' can be measured by the gross national product or per capita income (an assumption that has been challenged by the Human Development Index since the 1990s) or the philosophical foundations of homo oeconomicus, Cartesian rationality and a Baconian view on nature (see Ziai 2004).

3. Why we need to rethink our central concept

In section 1 we saw that discourses provide a contingent way of constructing reality, in section 2 we dealt with the assumptions of development discourse. This section aims to provide arguments why development researchers should rethink or even dismiss the concept of 'development'. It argues that the assumptions outlined in the previous section have Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications.

The concept of development has Eurocentric implications, because it assumes European societies (including above all the European settler colonies in North America) as ideal models ('developed'), in contrast to other societies which are deviations from this norm ('less developed'). This means other societies are not accepted as such, but merely as inferior versions of one's own society, because the standards of a good society are assumed to be both universal and identical with particular (European) standards – there is a universal scale of 'development' at the top of which we find the USA and Western Europe, while poorer societies are deemed 'traditional' and thus have to become 'modern' (i.e. Western). The idea that non-Western societies are historically backward and can be compared to earlier periods of European history has been described as the 'transformation of geo-cultural differences into historical stages' (1992: 146), as the 'chronification of spatial co-existence' (Melber 1992: 32) or simply as the 'colonizer's model of the world' (Blaut 1993) because it justified the colonial expansion of the most advanced states. The historical processes that these 'developed' societies underwent in the past centuries are thus not seen as contingent (dependent on certain capitalist relations of production, a colonial division of labour and certain – patriarchal – productivist values), but as universal progress of humanity. Here, the evolutionist heritage of the concept of 'development' is visible.

In this context, the methodological assumption of discrete 'development' units fails to realise that these historical processes can not simply be reproduced by other countries in completely different historical (economic, political, social) global environments. And the normative assumption that these processes have led to 'better', 'developed' societies neglects the downside of the historical processes of colonial industrial capitalism as well as the possibility that some cultures or some people in general might object to the assumption that highly individualised consumer societies based on competition, infinite human needs and unimpaired exploitation of nature constitute the best of all possible worlds.

Thus, from the perspective of the West, our own society serves as the standard by which the inferiority of the ('less developed') Other is identified. The diagnosis implies the therapy: they have to become more like us: more modern, more productive, more secular, more democratic, etc. Not only historically, but also conceptually the project of 'developing the underdeveloped' continued the older one of 'civilising the uncivilised'. While the Other is constructed as an inferior version of the Self in order to constitute the latter's identity as enlightened and superior (Hall 1992), the attempts to reform the Other in the image of the Self will never succeed entirely – the copy will never achieve the status of the original, at least 'not quite' (Bhabha 1994: 85-92). The concept is tainted with the colonial notion of European superiority.

Now few would contend that for many people in the world, a life in the USA or Germany and the democratic values of the Enlightenment often associated with the West do seem vastly more attractive than their current situation. Does this not prove the superiority of these societies, at least in the eyes of the majority? No, it does not, for several reasons. It leaves out the realisation that many aspects of these 'developed' societies, e.g. racism against immigrants, seem not attractive at all to the majority. Migrants are often dissatisfied with their economic and political situation in their country of origin, not with their country or culture in general. It also leaves out the relation between affluence in one and misery in another part of the world and the question of non-universalisable, oligarchic models of society, which can be maintained only because the production of other societies

is geared to the demands of the oligarchic society or because their level of pollution does not reach the level of the oligarchic one. And it leaves out the insight that although the terms 'democracy' and 'human rights' may be European inventions, the underlying concepts of political self-determination and moral standards and individual rights are definitely not, as many tribal societies with consensual democratic decision-making procedures have proven.

The concept of 'development' has depoliticising implications, because it obscures inequalities and conflicts on the national and international level. The World Development Reports up until very recently still constructed a scale along which the 'development' units are placed according to their per capita income. Although they also include statistics on Gini-coefficients, this still suggests that the average income denotes a certain 'level of development' of the population. This ranking neglects social inequality and the tremendous differences between living standards in the favelas and the residential estates. Not only here, but in general 'development' appears as something which refers to the situation of a group of people living in one country and which improves the life of all members of this group (see the methodological and normative assumptions in section 2).

Correspondingly, the classical paradigm of 'development' constructs social problems (whose existence is not called into question) in peripheral countries as 'development problems', as problems linked to a lack of capital, knowledge, technology, productivity, institutions, etc. which can be solved by projects or programmes of 'development' which deal with these shortcomings. These 'development' interventions are therefore serving the common good and benefiting all members of society – at least if they are successful. First of all, this perspective again neglects the differences between the supposed beneficiaries, between, say, farmers and landless labourers, small farmers and latifundistas, rural and urban poor, men and women, wage labourers and company owners, ruling elites and marginalised groups. Secondly, this perspective assumes that social problems can be solved with technocratic solutions – with solutions unconcerned with politics, relations of power and conflicts of interest, solutions that are rational and that no one can object to. However, problems of social inequality can only rarely be dealt with successfully in this manner, which is why James Ferguson argues: 'By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of 'development' is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today' (1994: 256).

In his study of a large integrated rural 'development' programme in Lesotho, Ferguson (1994) not only illustrates that in the name of 'development' the massive transfer of resources to the government enabled the ruling party to extend its administrative control in an oppositional province through financial support of its followers and infrastructure projects. He also points out that this technocratic bias in development discourse is reproduced by the institutional interests of 'development' organisations: 'An academic analysis is of no use to a 'development' agency unless it provides a place for the agency to plug itself in, unless it provides a charter for the sort of intervention that the agency is set up to do. An analysis which suggests that the causes of poverty in Lesotho are political and structural (not technical and geographical), that the national government is part of the problem (not a neutral instrument for its solution), and that meaningful change can only come through revolutionary social transformation in South Africa has no place in 'development' discourse simply because 'development' agencies are not in the business of promoting political realignments or supporting revolutionary struggles. ... For an analysis to meet the needs of 'development' institutions, it must do what academic discourse inevitably fails to do; it must make Lesotho out to be an enormously promising candidate for the only sort of intervention a 'development' agency is capable of launching: the apolitical, technical 'development' intervention.' (1994: 68f) In other words: 'development' organisations are designed (and allowed) to launch technocratic projects in the common interest, not to take sides with the less privileged parts of the population in conflicts on the national or international level. So in combating poverty while avoiding

political conflict, these organisations try to ameliorate the results of asymmetrical relations of power while not openly questioning or attacking these relations.

Although some NGOs adopt a more political and conflictive stance towards these issues, the large majority of 'development' organisations and consultants knows very well and adheres to the limits of what can be said and written in terms of project proposals and reports without endangering the flow of money in the 'development' industry. It is far easier to obtain funding for improved irrigation systems in agriculture ('development') than for supporting the struggle of indigenous groups or landless labourers for fundamental social change ('politics'). And a recent study by Li (2007) illustrates that the depoliticising implications of development discourse are still very influential, even when sustainability and participation are project priorities.

The concept of 'development' has authoritarian implications because it prescribes interventions in people's lives that these people themselves may disapprove of. Knowledge about 'development' is knowledge about how a good society looks like and how it can be realised. In so far as there are competing conceptions about this goal and the ways to get there, it invariably contains an authoritarian element because it is based on one particular conception which is then assumed to be universal while other conceptions are ignored or subordinated. 'Development' interventions based on expert knowledge are in the classical paradigm not in need of legitimation by the people affected by these interventions, because they are – as rational measures in the common interest – legitimated through expertise and through their results (output legitimacy, as the political scientists say). Here, the heritage of social technology and the principle of trusteeship are obvious. The experts know better what the people need than they themselves.

This holds true even after the trusteeship has been transferred to national elites after decolonisation, as is demonstrated by laws sanctioning non-participation in 'development' projects with corporeal punishment in Tanzania in the 1960s (Potter 2000: 287) by the violence accompanying the campaign to wipe out smallpox in India (Apffel-Marglin 1990), or by the Regional President of Southern Sudan announcing 'If we have to drive our people to paradise with sticks, we will do so for their own good' (Alvares 1992: 108). But of course Western experts still play an important role in the business; one of them self-critically remarks that 'development' 'is an empty word which can be filled by any user to conceal any hidden intention, a Trojan horse of a word. It implies that what is done to people by those more powerful than themselves is their fate, their potential, their fault.' (Frank 1997: 263)

Still, one might argue that if these interventions have positive results for the people concerned, this might make up for the lack of democratic participation and input legitimacy. However, a more thorough look at the history of development policy reveals a long list of White Elephants, failed projects and disastrous consequences of development projects. Probably the most obvious cases are large infrastructure projects like dams. According to the (rather conservative) estimates of the World Dam Commission, 40-80 million people have lost their homes as a result of dam projects in the name of 'development' (WCD 2000: xxx). Usually, these people are counted as 'environmental refugees'. It might be more appropriate to refer to them as 'development refugees'.

These interventions are more often than not designed or evaluated for funding by experts who are not locals nor speak the local languages, but who possess universally applicable knowledge on the process of 'development'. As the process takes place in all societies roughly in the same manner, the experts can be sent to any country, even without having been there before. They did not grow up or live in this society, but still they know how it is supposed to change.

Thus it can be argued that the authoritarian implementation of what has been defined as the common good is a structural feature of 'development' – despite the attempts to introduce the principles of participation, ownership and empowerment in development policy since the 1980s. While rigidly following these principles would be a powerful antidote against these authoritarian features, the practice shows that participation is in most cases closely confined due to the

institutional constraints of the 'development' industry (Cooke/Kothari 2001). As long as there are donors who spend tax payers' money on 'development', they will be reluctant to give up control, even if only out of responsibility towards their constituency – after all, they are supposed to represent their national interest. Thus orthodox conceptions of politics and identity play an important role in maintaining these relations of power as well.

Because of these Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications we as 'development' researchers should abandon the concept of 'development'. We can perfectly well describe and analyse reality without it.

4. On the difficulty of redefining 'development'

Now one could certainly argue that within the academic debate in development theory, there has been an awareness of most of these criticisms for a considerable time, and that there have been numerous attempts to redefine 'development' in a more critical manner. Beyond economic growth, 'development' was in the course of its career to include unemployment, basic needs, redistribution, self-reliance, school education, life expectancy, gender equality, empowerment, democracy and human rights or simply freedom. It was redefined as endogenous, participatory, alternative, sustainable and human 'development'. So the response to the criticisms raised above would be something like: 'Ok, modernisation theory's concept of development was certainly bad, but since then we have progressed a great deal'. A similar response, often from the Marxist camp, would be that the criticisms only apply to normative conceptions of development (as used in development policy), but not to those that are merely descriptive or analytical and talk about the development of capitalism. Within the poststructuralist framework, both could argue that the signifier 'development' can be and has been linked to other signifieds than was the case in the classical paradigm, and that a critical redefinition of the concept would therefore be rid of its supposedly nasty implications.

In this context, careful critics have questioned the theoretical coherence of the poststructuralist criticism of development discourse: If it is acknowledged that the meaning of 'development' has changed regularly in the history of development policy and is context-specific, up to the point where it was condemned as an 'amoeba-like concept' (Esteva 1985: 79), how can one reject the entire concept irrespective of its content? Crush, commenting on one of the Post-Development proponents (1995: 3), rightly argues: 'in the very call for banishment, Sachs implicitly suggests that it is possible to arrive at an unequivocal definition'.

The answer that can be given to these objections is twofold. For one, most of the redefinitions and alternative concepts of 'development' still share most of the core assumptions of development discourse and often even the tenets of the classical paradigm: our society is 'developed', theirs is not, therefore investments and technology and experts from the North are necessary to improve their lives. This holds true even for many of the allegedly descriptive and analytical versions. And even differing concepts of 'development' may have a similar function in that irrespective of their content they legitimate interventions based on expert knowledge and carried out under the principle of trusteeship in the name of the common good.

Second, even if the assumptions discussed are questioned by the redefined concept, and this is the case when sustainability leads to rejecting the model of the industrialised countries or when participation and empowerment lead to a rejection of expert knowledge and trusteeship, linking the signifier to a new signified it not as easy as it might seem in the first place:

'Development cannot delink itself from the words with which it was formed – growth, evolution, maturation. Just the same, those who now use the word cannot free themselves from a web of meanings that impart a specific blindness to their language, thought, and action. No matter the context in which it is used, or the precise connotation that the person using the word wants to give it, the expression becomes qualified and coloured by meanings perhaps unwanted. The word always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. The word indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and towards a desirable goal. ... for two-thirds of the people on earth, this positive meaning of the word 'development' ... is a reminder of what they are not. It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition' (Esteva 1992: 19, emphasis in the original)

The web of meanings tied around the concept during six decades of development policy cannot be unmade simply by adopting a progressive definition. The – perhaps unwanted – implications are still there, even if we try to give the term a different meaning. Of course, from a poststructuralist point of view, there is no guarantee that any new alternative concept will not be instrumentalised and linked

to similarly negative images and connotations. However, this possibility can not be evaded, there are no 'pure' or essentially critical signifiers, meanings is always contested and there are always discursive struggles. Regarding the concept of 'development' and its implications, attempts to redefine it in a progressive manner seem to be but a losing battle, or at least one that faces extremely long odds and may take decades. A simpler alternative is to drop the concept and find a new one.

5. On misunderstandings and their productivity

Even if one does not share the analysis presented here regarding the negative implications of the concept of 'development', I argue there is still a case to abandon the concept simply because it causes so many misunderstandings and through this obstructs the academic and political debate. Misunderstandings results from the fact that the same signifier is linked with different signifieds in the systems of representation of different actors. Whereas one assumes 'development' to denote a higher income for the rural population, a second links it with a better investment climate for multinational companies leading to employment and economic growth, a third with sustainable resource use, a fourth with better health care for mothers and infants, a fifth with economic and cultural imperialism, and a sixth with an opportunity to make a living in the aid business. 'Development' means different things to different people. The productivity of these differences in definition lies in the fact that they allow these people to co-operate without having to engage in conflict about their different assumptions and world views.

Even a cursory glance reveals that within 'development' projects and programmes the term refers to (e.g.) road building, hydroenergy and irrigation, resettlement, birth control, biodiversity conversation, introduction of more productive agricultural techniques, food-for-work programmes, counter-insurgency measures, micro-credit provision and small enterprise promotion, fighting corruption and improvement in electoral participation (Ziai 2009). We simply have to acknowledge that although these measures may have all been carried out under the banner of improving living standards and pursuing the common good, we are dealing with extremely heterogeneous interventions that may affect the lives of different groups in positive or negative ways.

However, especially the latter aspect is obscured by the normative assumption that 'development' is something good – and by the assumption that development organisations produce 'development'. There are plenty of examples that the work of development organisations has not benefited but sometimes even harmed the poor. But again we are caught up in misunderstandings: a project may be successful in promoting 'development' in the sense of improving agricultural productivity yet fail in achieving 'development' in the sense of reducing poverty because only well-off farmers can afford the new technology. Often, two meanings are conflated: one the one hand 'development' as a 'process of transition or transformation toward a modern, capitalist, industrial economy' and on the other 'development' as the 'reduction or amelioration of material want' (Ferguson 1994: 15). Criticisms raised against negative consequences of development policies are usually countered with references to the latter meaning, which subsequently often serve to legitimate interventions which are closer to the former meaning. But even if this is not the case, misunderstandings abound.

It should not be ignored that these misunderstandings can be beneficial to progressive NGOs as well. There are some NGOs whose understanding of 'development' comes close to 'supporting marginalised groups in the South in their political struggles'. Because their interventions and projects are designated as 'development', there is a chance that they will get funding by development institutions which have a rather different understanding of the concept.

In general, however, the productivity of misunderstandings related to the concept is less benign: it allows countless interventions with often highly dubious aims and effects to be launched in the name of the common good while being supported or even conducted by people who would otherwise not subscribe to these aims and effects.

6. Alternative concepts

For these reasons, I propose that we as development researchers should be more careful and more precise in our language – and maybe in our practices of producing knowledge and legitimating policy. If we are examining strategies of farmers to cope with climate change or looking for factors contributing to economic marginality or analysing conflicts about irrigation or land distribution, there is nothing wrong with it. But why should we call all this 'development research' and thereby blur what we are actually doing by subsuming it under this all-too-vague concept with dubious implications?

Well, some people argue, we should do so for lack of a better concept. But there are plenty. If we are for example referring to rural-urban migration or processes of de-industrialisation, we do not have to talk about 'processes of development', we can use the concept of social change. If we are referring to processes of redistribution on an international scale through bilateral and multilateral agencies, there is no need to call this 'development aid' – why not designate this as global social policy – or as foreign economic policy if it is about promoting opportunities for one's own corporations? If we are striving for a world different from the present one in which tens of thousands of people are dying each single day for lack of food, clean water or affordable medicine while others live in affluence, why should we not admit that we are guided by the ideals of justice and solidarity or the concept of human rights – instead of pursuing 'development'? What are development theory and policy concerned with, if not with the explanation and amelioration of global social inequality?

If we want to measure the qualities of different ways of living and compare them, why not include incidences of suicide and violent crime, racism and sexism, the propensity to conduct wars, the relation to nature and other societies and therefore the pressing question to what extent a certain way of living depends on the subordination of other economies and ecologies (their resources, their labour power) for its consumption patterns or on the production of exclusion and inequality? And what would such a reorientation mean for those conducting research and guiding policy on the political, economic, social, cultural and ecological systems of this world, and their interconnections?

Let us find out.

Postscript July 13: But what about the ZEF?

Immediately after its publication, the paper has provoked some reactions within the Center for Development Research which point to the need to clarify and specify the argument. First of all, the aim of the paper is obviously not to abolish ZEF altogether. Although the controversial approach of radical Post-Development critics to abandon the whole 'development project' – with its implication that there are problems in the South and there is problem-solving knowledge in the North – is not entirely unreasonable, this line of argument has not been pursued here. The paper has merely argued for discarding the discourse of 'development', and adopting a less ambiguous and more precise language. Nevertheless, this leads us to the question, how we at ZEF deal with the argument presented here.

The answer to the question is of course contingent, it depends on certain political priorities and values, so there is no 'right' and 'wrong' to be found here. I see basically three ways to answer the question, which can be roughly sketched as follows:

1) We could counter the argument of this paper on the grounds that we actually do believe that societies in the South should be transformed according to the image of the North and become

more productive, more democratic, more technologically advanced, more secular, more competitive, more industrialised etc. and that technical solutions will solve the problems of 'underdevelopment'. In this case there is no problem to retain the concept of 'development' in the name of our institute.

2) We could endorse the argument of this paper and change our name to 'Center for the Study of Social Change', or, more precisely, 'Center for Inequality Research'. We would publicly announce that we are exploring social, economic and ecological inequalities and ways to reduce and eliminate it. This would be the most consistent line of action according to what I have presented in this paper.

3) We could accept the argument but still stick to our present name, acknowledging that there are institutional pressures and needs: the scientific and political contexts in which we act usually still subsume our work under the concept of 'development', and it may be easier to maintain access to people's minds and in particular to financial resources if we continue to act as a Center for Development Research. However, we could add as a common ground or even as a subtitle that we are concerned with 'Global social inequality'. Moreover, we could discuss if it is helpful to avoid the concept of 'development' in our daily routine, aware of the implications and misunderstandings accompanying it. This would be a somewhat inconsistent, but pragmatic conduct.

If the fundamental tenet of discourse analysis is correct and the way we construct our social reality through language does have profound consequences, then the debate over our answer here at ZEF is not marginal but highly significant.

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