

Third world development: the simpler way critique of conventional theory and practice

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Abstract

Thinking about development is dominated by a conventional conception which takes for granted the centrality of increasing production for sale, integration into the globalized market place, moving to more sophisticated technologies, and the goal of rising to affluent rich-world living standards. Basic criticisms of this conception of development are briefly summarized, firstly to do with the way it has primarily benefitted the rich and secondly regarding its grossly unsustainable resource implications. Global biophysical resource endowments prohibit its realization. There has been remarkably little thinking from conventional or critical sources on the goals and means which a sustainable alternative must take. The Simpler Way project is concerned to show the necessity for, and desirability and workability of, the development of mostly small scale, cooperative, highly self-sufficient and self-governing local economies focused on meeting basic needs, and not concerned with economic growth, globalization, competing in the global market place, or aspiring to rich-world “living standards”. It is argued that only some form of Simpler Way can enable satisfactory global development within sustainable resource and ecological limits.

Introduction

The literature on Third World development has mostly been framed in terms of a single taken-for-granted conception, which is labelled “conventional” in the following discussion. Since the 1990s a “post–development” literature has arisen expressing a variety of discontents with the conventional view. However the following discussion argues that general perspective is also deficient regarding the implications of sustainability for development. The major fault in most if not all previous development thinking has been failure to grasp the need for materially simple lifestyles and systems.

Following is a summary critique of essential elements and claims in conventional development and critiques of these. It is necessary to begin by attending to these features in order to proceed to elaboration of The Simpler Way perspective which it is claimed avoids them.

The inadequacy of the conventional perspective

The centrality of economic growth

The defining characteristic of conventional development is economic growth. Growth of GDP is commonly taken to *be* development. Even where other criteria are included in the concept of development, such as declining infant mortality or malnutrition rates, economic growth is typically regarded as the prerequisite or enabler of development.

However development should be thought of as involving the improvement of all aspects of the whole society, not just its GDP. Further it should not be assumed that the best way to improve these factors is to grow the economy. Indeed it will be argued below that when the supreme goal is economic growth many important aspects of a society are not just neglected but are damaged.

Secondly even within the economic sector of society, development is not equivalent to growth. The conventional conception involves no notion of what the end goal of development might be or when there has been sufficient growth in various elements. It only assumes an economy that constantly increases in size.

The most important contradiction is between development that will maximize the GDP and development that is appropriate in view of the needs and welfare of individuals and society. When maximizing the GDP is the goal the owners of capital will be encouraged to put more land into export crops even if there is an urgent need to produce more food for hungry people. However if land was taken out of production of export crops and put into growing food for hungry people the GDP would be reduced. Conventional economic theory does not attend to the ways in which growth reduces benefit.

Underlying these issues is the powerful but rarely recognized assumption regarding the “unidimensional” nature of development. It is thought of as capable of varying only along one dimension, to do with the amount of business turnover or production for sale and the associated level of industrialization, trade, infrastructures etc. All nations can be lined up according to their GDP per capita, and development is about moving up the slope towards the rich world end of this single dimension. But again there are many dimensions relevant to assessing development, and some are much more important than the economic dimension.

These have been reasons why GDP should not be regarded as the, or even an, important index of development appropriately defined. Development should be understood as multifactorial, indicating the need to list incommensurable goals in order of priority and to design a range of specific policies to achieve each of them.

But there are far more powerful grounds for recognizing that growth can have no place in an acceptable conception of development.

The limits to growth perspective: the overlooked implications for development

It is remarkable that the development literature has given so little attention to the “limits to growth” analysis of the global predicament. No other set of considerations has such profound implications for development in rich and poor worlds. Over the last fifty years there has accumulated an extensive and overwhelmingly convincing case that global resource consumption and ecological impacts are far beyond sustainable levels. This rules out any possibility of all the world’s people rising to the present material “living standards” presently enjoyed by the one-fifth who live in rich countries, let alone to the levels of consumption growth would lead them to (TSW, 2019).

The magnitude of the overshoot needs to be stressed. The World Wildlife Fund’s Footprint index (WWF, 2019) shows that to provide one Australian with the amount of food, water, energy and settlement area now used, about 7 ha of productive land are required. Therefore if the possibly 10 billion people expected to be on earth by 2050 were to live as Australians live now around 70 billion ha would be required. However there are only about 8 billion ha of productive land available on the planet. This indicates that Australians are consuming natural resources at close to 10 times the rate all people in the world could rise to.

Other measures indicate worse multiples. For instance the top ten iron and aluminium ore consumers have per capita average rates of consumption 80 times greater than all the rest (Wiedmann, et al., 2014).

But the implications of growth must be added to this analysis. If the 10 billion people expected to be on earth by 2050 were to rise to the “living standards” Australians would have then given 3% p.a. economic growth, the amount of producing and consuming going on in the world would be *20 times* as great as it is now, and by 2073 the multiple would be 40.

The common response to this case is to claim that technical advance will make multiples of this order possible. It is not difficult to point out the extreme implausibility of this “tech-fix” faith. However, many studies of this thesis have found that despite decades of constant effort to improve productivity, recycling and efficiency, growth of GDP continues to be accompanied by *growth* of impacts and demands. That is, no absolute decoupling is taking place. Recent lengthy reviews of hundreds of studies by Hickel and Kalis (2019), Parrique et al., (2019) and Haberl, et al. (2020) confirm this finding and state that no reversal of it is likely.

Why should the analysis be in terms of the possibility of generalising rich world practices to all people? The answer is that this is the taken-for-granted goal of development and it is built into the foundations of the present global economic system, so it is important to consider the likely consequences.

This focus on the biophysical resource limits of the planet shows that appropriate development must be conceived in terms of large scale descent to a zero-growth or steady-state economy, operating at levels of GDP that are a small fraction of those in rich countries today. There is now a significant Degrowth movement based on this recognition.

The connections between the market and inappropriate development

No principle is more fundamental in conventional development theory and practice than that maximum freedom should be given for market forces to determine what happens. However it is difficult to refute the claim that the result is development that is not and that cannot be geared to the most urgent needs.

The global economy is a market system and the two major effects of the market system on development are:

Market forces allow the relatively rich few to get most or all of the available resources.

For example, while possibly 850 million people lack sufficient food, which might require 40 million tonnes of grain p.a. to remedy, over 40% of world grain production is fed to animals each year, mostly in rich countries (FAO, 2013).

These extremely unequal distributions of the world's resource wealth come about primarily because it is an economic system in which some individuals and countries can afford to pay much more to purchase scarce goods. Market forces inevitably allocate scarce items to those who are able and willing to pay more. Markets do not take into account what is needed, what is just, or what will contribute to social cohesion or ecological sustainability.

In the Third World Market forces have mostly developed industries that are inappropriate to the needs of people and ecosystems

A great deal of development has taken place in the Third World but little of it has been development of the most needed industries and systems. Because it has been determined largely by market forces the development has been mostly the development of industries to provide commodities and consumer goods for the benefit of local elites and for export to the rich countries, while the labour, land and infrastructures involved could have been devoted to meeting urgent needs.

Thus conventional development can be seen as a process which draws Third World productive capacity into producing mostly for the benefit of the local rich classes, the transnational corporations and banks, and consumers in rich countries.

Integration with the global economy: globalisation

The conventional approach to development assumes that movement towards a single unified global economic system is desirable. This is seen as providing greater access for all to markets, productive and export opportunities and sources of imports. Globalization involves reducing impediments to trade and investment such as tariffs, protection, subsidies and government intervention in the market. The pressure is on economies and individuals to produce for sale into the global economy in order to earn the income needed to purchase from it.

This arrangement has significant benefits but it forces all nations, regions and individuals into competing in the one market and many inevitably fail to do this very effectively. Nations must focus on selling whatever resources they have cheaply. The poorest people and regions, and some entire countries, especially in Africa and the Pacific, are largely irrelevant to the interests of transnational corporations and therefore cannot expect much investment or development. They have no cheap resources to attract foreign investors and could not compete in export markets if they did.

Globalization is in the interests of rich nations and their corporations because it increases their freedom of access to resources and consumers in all countries. It involves leaving development to market forces, which in effect means that there will only be development of whatever it suits the corporations to develop.

A large literature has now accumulated documenting the damaging effects neoliberal globalization has had on many people and nations. Alternative/appropriate development is not possible unless governments exercise significant levels of control and regulation over their economies, trade, foreign investment etc. Its core principle contradicts globalization; appropriate development must be local.

Development is capital intensive

Conventional development cannot take place unless large amounts of capital are acquired and invested. Land, equipment and expertise must be paid for in order to set up plantations, factories, mines, fishing and logging operations etc. Because there must be large scale export of commodities or manufactured goods, costly infrastructures must be built. Therefore

governments take on large debts to build them, reducing the capacity to attend to basic necessities. However the alternative conception to be discussed below involves little need for capital, and in some important sectors such as basic food production almost none might be required.

The “trickle down” assumption

The basic justification for conventional development is that although it mostly enriches the rich, in time “...wealth will trickle down to benefit all.” There is indeed a tendency for this to happen, but there are several reasons for rejecting this strategy.

Little trickles down

In the global economy the amount of benefit that trickles down is evident in the fact that one-fifth of the world's people now receive about 70 times the amount of income the poorest one-fifth get, and according to a number of studies such as by Hickel (2017) the ratio is getting worse. Edward and Summer (2013) report that between 1990 and 2010 global consumption increased by \$10 – \$15 trillion, but 1% of people received 15% of it. The gain for each of them was 637 times as much as the gain for the poorest 53% of the world's people.

The strongest justification for the trickle down strategy is the claim that poverty has been greatly reduced. The conditions large numbers experience have indeed improved greatly, but the situation is complex and the overall effects are debated. The reduction in global poverty rates seems to have been due mostly to achievements in China (Hickel, 2017). Edward and Summer (2013) find that if Chinese figures are omitted then there has been little if any improvement in global inequality and poverty rates in recent decades.

Conventional “development” also impoverishes; what are the net effects?

Conventional economists typically enthuse about gains and benefits but fail to attend to the losses and costs. Conventional development drives some people into poverty, mainly by depriving them of resources and livelihoods they once had. When governments allow corporations to log forests and build dams and mines, tribal and peasant people can be removed from their ancestral lands. Fletcher (2016) quoting the U.N. Human Development Report says that in 2003 after decades of Neoliberal development, 54 nations were poorer than they had been in 1990, and Sub-Saharan Africa had a lower per capita income than 40 years before. (See also Hickel, 2016.) The poor in Third World countries that are most integrated into the global economy have fared worse than those in other countries (Wodin and Lucas, 2006, p. 55, Meredith, 2005).

It is not clear how big the net gains in income, employment and welfare have been but the above evidence on global poverty changes suggest that they have not been as spectacular as is commonly claimed.

The rate of trickle down development is extremely slow

At present rates it would probably take more than a hundred years for the “living standards” of the poor majority in the Third World to rise to present rich world levels...and by that time rich world GDP per capita would have become extreme. Yet if the available resources could be

applied directly by people to meeting their own needs rapid improvements would easily be achieved.

The moral issue

The trickle down rationale promises to improve the welfare of those in great need via crumbs from the tables of the rich. Most of the benefit of conventional development goes to national elites, foreign corporations and rich world consumers. A morally acceptable development process would prioritize improving the conditions of the poorest.

The global resource situation will not permit Trickle Down to work

The strongest argument against trickle-down doctrine is that the limits to growth rule out any chance that development which promises to lift the poor to rich world affluence via trickle down benefits can succeed. There are far too few resources for this to be achieved.

The structural adjustment packages

The most powerful forces imposing these forms of developments on the Third World over the last several decades have come via the Structural Adjustment Packages of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. When a Third World country's debts become impossible for it to repay it must go to these agencies for assistance. They arrange for more loans to enable debt repayments to be made, but they do so on condition that a Structural Adjustment Package is accepted. This package obliges the country to implement a number of policies that are supposed to improve the economy, such as cutting government spending including subsidies to local industry and assistance to poor people, opening the economy to more foreign investment, increasing exports, devaluing (making exports cheaper for rich countries to buy, and making the country pay more for the imports from them), reducing government regulation, reducing government ownership and control and generally increasing adoption of free market policies.

There is considerable evidence that in general these measures have had little or no effect in "getting the economy going again". More importantly, the packages promote the interests of the rich countries and their corporations and banks because impediments to their access to Third World resources and markets are reduced, they can buy up the firms that go bankrupt, they can hire cheaper labour, they can import more cheaply from the country while being paid more for exports to it. In addition SAPs make repayments to rich world banks top priorities for national governments.

Conventional development can therefore be regarded as a form of legitimized plunder

Conventional development gears most of the Third World's productive capacity to rich world demand. Most of its produced resource wealth flows to consumers and corporations in rich countries. Thus the global political economy can be regarded as an imperial system. Rich world living standards could not be as high as they are if rich world people were not securing far more than an equal share of the world's resources. Unlike previous imperial systems this one functions mainly through financial arrangements, especially those surrounding debt. In general gunboats are not required for its maintenance and extension.

This general view of the development field has been argued by many analysts over recent decades. For instance Goldsmith (1997) discusses “development as colonialism”. Rist (1997, p. 243) says, “...development has resulted in material and cultural expropriation”. Schwarz and Schwarz (1998, p. 3) say, “Development now seems little more than a window dressing for economic colonialism”. Chossudovsky (1997) details the mechanisms, especially in relation to finance and Structural Adjustment Packages. These are a few of the sources that have documented the reasons why conventional development can be regarded as a form of legitimized plunder. Reference is made below to these kinds of conclusions in the more recent “post-development” critical literature.

The connection with oppressive foreign policy

The forgoing argument has been that much of the injustice evident in the world is due to the normal working of the global economy. However from time to time people who are deprived and exploited tend to become discontented and can only be kept working in the mines, plantations and sweatshops through violent repression. This is usually readily imposed by the local ruling classes, but often rich countries provide arms, training and other assistance to put down dissent or assist rebels undermining a non-compliant regime. From time to time rich countries invade to install regimes willing to rule in their interests, or take steps to get rid of those that are not.

Thus there are strong causal connections between conventional development and rich world affluence, Third World deprivation, imperial domination and armed conflict. If the rich few are determined to continue to secure their disproportionate share of increasingly scarce world resources they would be well advised to remain heavily armed. (For overviews see TSW: 2018a TSW: 2018b.)

Alternative, appropriate development ... The simpler way

The tragedy of development theory and practice is that so few realize that satisfactory, appropriate, development would be easily achieved, although it would require radical change in lifestyles, systems and aspirations.

Let us begin by asking what factors are most important for a high quality of life? What goals would satisfactory development be aimed at? There would probably be a high degree of agreement on the following list.

- Good health.
- Having sufficient good quality food, shelter and clothing.
- Belonging to and being involved in a supportive community.
- Having meaning and purpose, important tasks, projects, interests.
- Feeling secure, from unemployment, poverty, violence, illness, stress, isolation and social breakdown.
- Freedom/autonomy over one’s life and work.
- Having a valued and interesting livelihood; being respected for making a useful contribution.
- Not having to work hard or struggle; a relaxed pace.

- Closeness to nature; living in or close to a beautiful environment.
- Having a sense of place, a home.
- Having pride in one's family, town, society, institutions, nation.

It is important to note that money, wealth or possessions are hardly relevant to any of these items, and none requires a high GDP. All can in principle be achieved easily by reorganizing lifestyles and systems along the following lines.

1. Enable people to begin applying the existing resources and productive capacity around them, especially their own labour and skills, to producing the mostly simple things that are needed to give them a high quality of life.

Most if not all Third World regions have all the resources they need to build the basic structures and systems which would provide a high quality of life to all in a few years at most, via relatively simple technologies, lifestyles and systems. Achieving these goals in a short period of time is possible with little or no foreign investment, trade, heavy industrialization, aid, external expert advice or sophisticated technology, and with little need for monetary capital.

2. Put priority on cooperation, participation and collective arrangements and effort.

Most farms and firms might be privately owned but the members of settlements must have collective control over their basic functions and must gear these to maximizing the welfare of all. People arrange and contribute to town meetings, working bees, cooperatives, committees, commons, and town mini-banks. Villagers govern themselves, researching, planning, deciding development action via thoroughly participatory procedures such as village and town assemblies.

3. Very simple material living standards must be willingly accepted.

Affluent lifestyles and rich world living standards must be understood as impossible for all to have, and unnecessary for a high quality of life. The goal must be material *sufficiency* on levels of per capita resource consumption that are as low as possible. This does not mean deprivation or hardship must be accepted. Very satisfactory lifestyles and systems can be provided on per capita resource consumption levels that are literally around 10% of rich world national averages. (See further below.)

4. The basic element in appropriate development is the small, highly self-sufficient and largely co-operative local economy.

Most of the basic goods and services used by people must be produced in and close to the towns and suburbs they live in, by local people using local resources mostly in cooperative local firms and farms. These must focus on the production of necessities and on minimizing exports to and imports from the wider national and international economies. The village and regional economies might contain mostly private firms and most of these might operate wholly or partly within markets. However responsibility for all important activities that the market economy does not perform satisfactorily must be undertaken by the Community Development Cooperative. It will have considerable power to either get the market sector to attend to necessities, or go around it to organize community provision by establishing its own cooperatives etc.

If lifestyles are frugal and most basic items are produced locally there can be dramatic reductions in dollar and resource costs. There would be little need for transport to bring goods into settlements, or to move workers out to distant work places. Most people might need to engage in paid work only twice a week, and most of this might be accessed on foot or by bicycle. Especially important is the development of local leisure and entertainment options, overseen by village leisure and educational committees.

It must be stressed that only localized systems are capable of achieving the dramatic reductions in resource use sustainability requires. This is due to a) the complex *integration* of functions and processes, b) the close *proximity* of functions, and c) the *informal* "administration" by ordinary people as they go about their daily activities. For example a study of egg supply (Trainer, Malik and Lenzen, 2019) found that the backyard and village cooperative path could have dollar and resource costs less than 2% of the conventional agribusiness-supermarket path. This is largely because proximity enables all organic wastes to be recycled by hand to nearby compost heaps, gardens, fish ponds and methane digesters, much poultry food to come from local sources especially free ranging, thereby eliminating the need for factories, trucks, chemicals, supermarkets, marketing, packaging, and expensive buildings, managers and professionals, etc.

The *Remaking Settlements* study (Trainer, 2019) derives detailed estimates of the dollar and energy costs that would be theoretically achievable within a rich world outer city suburb, partly based on records from the Pigface Point homestead (TSW, 2018c). These indicate greatly reduced costs compared with present rich world national averages, and little need for goods and services that cannot be produced within small towns and regions. For instance the per capita energy costs of food in the US are literally more than a hundred times as great as those estimated in this study for locally-produced food. Lockyer's (2017) study of the Dancing Rabbit Eco-village in Missouri found that per capita rates of electricity, fuel, vehicle use, water use and garbage generation are in the region of 5-10% of US national averages.

5. Sophisticated technology is of little importance for meeting basic needs.

Although many modern ways would be of considerable value, a well-developed village or region might be achieved with little more than traditional hand tool technologies. Voluntary working bees can build the simple structures needed, especially community centres and workshops, clinics, stores and business premises, using mostly local materials such as earth, stone and timber.

There are however areas in which sophisticated technologies are important, most obviously to do with health services, and these require arrangements which extend beyond the village. Nearby regional economies would contain larger productive units providing for instance radios, fridges, light manufacturing. State and national economies would need to enable small quantities of items such as cement, light steel, pumps and plastic pipe.

6. Satisfactory material living standards are easily achieved, without sophisticated technology and with minimal resource use.

This is probably the most important point for advocates of the alternative path to make clear and convincing because the claim can seem to be quite implausible. The quality of

life goals listed above depend almost entirely on social arrangements, not on individual wealth. Where material standards are relevant (e.g., in housing) structures and systems usually can be simple and frugal yet entirely adequate, indeed often functionally and aesthetically superior.

It should also be stressed again that these large reductions in resource, dollar and ecological costs are also typically associated with a higher experienced quality of life (Lockyer, 2017; Grinde, 2017). (See also TSW, 2018d). The main task advocates of the alternative path have is to provide convincing accounts of the sufficiency, achievability and desirability of these simpler ways.

7. There is negligible need for corporations, big banks, capital, loans and debt, or for involvement in the global economy.

Because The Simpler Way requires few elaborate structures or systems there is little need for monetary capital. Most of the development needed can be achieved by drawing on “capital” in the form of local skills, labour and enthusiasm. Often the necessary material resources are locally available in the form of land, earth for building, timber, stone, rainfall, manures, plant and animal materials and traditional knowledge and skills. Because levels of town and regional self-sufficiency are high and lifestyles are materially simple there is little need to export into the global economy to earn the money to purchase from it, and therefore little need to build infrastructures such as ports and airfields. There need only be sufficient concern with exporting into the global economy to acquire sufficient capacity to purchase crucial necessities from it. Because there is also little need for capital borrowing and debt can be minimal. Similarly foreign investment should be confined to the provision of necessities that cannot be produced from local sources.

8. Social, cultural and ecological goals take priority over economic goals.

Development decisions must be based on considerations of social need, morality, justice, rights, tradition, social cohesion and ecological sustainability. No attention need be paid to the GDP; whether it rises or falls is irrelevant. A wide range of appropriate development measures should be developed, such as those included in Bhutan’s index of Gross National Happiness.

9. National governments must do as much regulating, subsidizing, planning and controlling of the economy as is necessary to enable the foregoing goals.

National governments should prioritize assisting the industries and infrastructures needed to maximize local self-sufficiency, while organizing village access to those items that must be produced elsewhere in the relatively small remaining national economy. They should distribute mostly light industries across the rural landscape, so that all villages can earn small amounts producing a few basic items for the national economy and thus be able to pay for the few items they need to import from it.

National governments should work to reduce national, regional, village and individual dependence on surviving in the global economy, i.e., assist them to become less tied to importing, exporting, and borrowing.

10. Ideally the transition would be gradual.

The transition can be a process of gradually building a new “Needs-Driven-Economy” underneath the old “Profit-Driven-Economy”. It can begin by a few coming together as a Community Development Cooperative to organize the provision of some neglected basic goods and services, for example by setting up community gardens, poultry co-ops or aged care rosters. Their long term goal would be to increase these cooperative, socially desirable non-market activities until they might largely replace the old economy.

11. Nothing is more important than the understanding of “development” that people have.

It is crucial that people be helped to see that conventional/capitalist theory and practice is an ideology enabling and legitimizing wealth extraction, and to see that there is an alternative. It is distressing that billions of people do not realize that there can be other than the conventional “unidimensional” approach which locks them into continued poverty and deprivation waiting for trickle down, when they could be developing relatively simple systems that would quickly enable far better conditions.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that because this alternative conception constitutes a head-on contradiction of conventional development theory and practice it sets a mortal challenge to the interests of large numbers of rich and powerful individuals, classes, agencies and nations. The more that local self-sufficiency and frugal lifestyles are adopted the less participation in and dependence on the global market system there will need to be, and the less opportunity for capital-intensive development. It is therefore not surprising that the alternative is largely ignored in mainstream discussion, agencies and projects.

Nevertheless many of the alternative elements listed above are increasingly being embraced and are informing practice in rich and poor worlds. Examples include the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Via Campesino movement involving an estimated 200 million people, the Chikukwa movement in Zimbabwe, (Leahy, 2018, TSW, 2018e), the Catalan Integral Cooperative in Spain (TSW, 2018f), the Global Eco-village Movement now including thousands of people in rich and poor countries (Global Ecovillage Network, 2018) and involving the intention of the Senegalese government to develop 1,400 Eco-villages (St Onge, 2015), and the Voluntary Simplicity (Simplicity Institute, 2018), Downshifting and Transition Towns movements.

Relation to post-development and other critical literatures

The foregoing account aligns with many elements expressed by “post-development” theorists. These include the claims that conventional development represents only one of a number of conceivable forms of development, enshrines the market, assumes the superiority of a globalized economy and thus rejects localism, takes a narrowly economic view of welfare and progress, legitimizes extractivism and imposes a form of development that suits the rich, has failed to solve development problems, accepts goals which are not achievable in view of the limits to growth, and assumes the superiority of Western culture and thus disregards the cultures of Third World people. Especially relevant to the above discussion is the recognition

of development as a “discourse” or ideology which misleads thinking in the interests of the powerful and causes people to fail to see what is in their interests.

However most of the “post-development” commentary has been merely critical and has had relatively little to say about desirable alternative forms of development which is the Simpler Way focus. Proposals have been mostly highly abstract and directed at a wish list of centralized/state action, (e.g., reduce inequality) and not aimed at explaining the possible structure and functioning of an alternative economy. Above all little attention has been given to the essential role frugality and simpler lifestyles and systems must play.

The general “Unequal Exchange”, Dependency and Marxist accounts of underdevelopment can be criticized for unwittingly adopting the conventional “unidimensional” view of development. The former is concerned with the loss of monetary wealth from Third World countries due to trade conditions which involve unequal exchange. This is seen as hindering development, but development is still conceived in conventional terms, i.e., growth of GDP and rising to rich world levels of industrialization and affluence, with no attention given to global resource limits.

Similarly Dependency theory is concerned with the ways development in poorer countries takes forms that are dependent on the interests of dominant powers, such as relying primarily on resource extraction, but again the goals and means are basically conventional.

Marxist theory is focused on the exploitative nature of capitalism but at least implicitly assumes that if this was eliminated development towards conventional goals would be enabled. Again development is conceived in terms of stimulating productivity and technical advance to enable investment designed to increase GDP per capita. It also endorses centralized control, heavy industrialization, high material “living standards”, large scale, and technical advance, and has little regard for localism or “peasant” ways. Marxist theory can be seen as a variety of capitalist development; one in which the capital is not privately owned.

These three theoretical perspectives do not recognize that the core problem is to do with *what is being developed* and the kind of society that is to be built. The argument above has been firstly that a system driven by private capital seeking to maximize profit in a market will inevitably develop the wrong things, and secondly that only a conception based on localism, self-sufficiency, collectivism and frugality can enable development that is satisfactory for social and sustainability reasons. Thus the core element in Simpler Way theory is not the faulty productive relationship in capitalism which Marxist theory focuses on; it is the market system with its inevitable imperatives to growth and inequality.

Some Marxists have not only adopted the conventional definition of development but have insisted that Marx’s theory of history requires the maturation of capitalist development in the Third World before conditions enabling revolutionary transition to a post-capitalist society will have been created. This has led to attempts to block revolutionary movements as being premature. (See for example, Avineri, 1968, and Warren, 1980, and the pre-revolutionary Russian Marxists.) The alternative perspective being argued here rejects this understanding of the situation.

It is remarkable that late in his life Marx entertained the possibility of a transition path, one which aligns to a considerable extent with the alternative being argued for here, i.e., building on the model of the traditional Russian collective village, the Mir. Mainstream socialist thinking

regarding transition has disregarded this possibility, but it is central in the Simpler Way perspective, which accepts that the most promising approach to appropriate development can begin within existing settlements.

A final critical comment on the general Marxist perspective is that a sustainable and just approach to development is not well described as Socialist. It is obviously anti-capitalist, but the standard Socialist vision embraces strongly centralized government, bureaucratization, leadership by experts and officials, industrialization, technical advance, “modernization”, complex urbanized systems and high material living standards. Its goals do not focus on smallness of scale, localism, sufficiency or self-governing communities, nor has it shown much respect for low technology and peasant ways let alone voluntary simplicity and largely autonomous and self-governing communities. Nor does the Socialist revolutionary strategy pay much attention to the need for radical cultural/ideological change before structural change. (Noted by Avineri, 1968.) Similarly its assumed revolutionary means involve confronting capitalism in typically violent struggles by workers led by vanguard parties.

In sharp contrast the approach argued above is the opposite of centralized and top-down, focusing on local initiative and autonomy, on smallness of scale, on thoroughly participatory democracy and citizen initiative rather than control by official authority, and especially on the need for deep cultural change before significant structural change is possible. Similarly its revolutionary strategy does not focus on direct let alone violent confrontation but on “prefiguring” the new within the old, primarily as an educational means of subversion and ultimately replacement. Thus the alternative is best described as a variety of Anarchism. (For more detailed discussion of transition theory, especially on differences with Marxist theory, see Trainer, 2020.)

However the most important blind spot in all these critical perspectives has been failure to grasp the biophysical situation. Many have taken for granted the same affluence and GDP growth goals as conventional theorists, which are impossible to achieve and indeed suicidal for the planet. The foregoing argument has been that when the biophysical situation is recognized satisfactory development can only be conceived in terms of some form of Simpler Way.

The significance for environmental issues and non-violent transition

The alternative development goal argued above has significant implications for the planetary ecological crisis, and for peace in the world. Because it involves large scale reduction in resource consumption it would greatly reduce global ecological impacts. The above discussion of limits and multiples shows that any attempt to develop the Third World to rich world ways is grossly unsustainable. It is characteristic of Simpler Way thinking that solutions are sought via reductions on the demand side whereas much current thinking about the environmental problem involves faith in the emergence of supply and provision solutions, that is, “tech-fix” ways of sustaining current throughput levels while ameliorating ecological impacts.

Similarly the strategic implications involve a greatly reduced level of violent conflict in the world. Marxist transition strategies typically involve head-on confrontation intended to eliminate ruling class control, and these have had a tragic and not very successful history. The Simpler Way approach recognizes that unlike previous revolutionary situations a goal

centred on localism and simplicity cannot be achieved unless and until extreme cultural change has taken place and that when it has then peaceful change in structures will have become conceivable, and indeed perhaps relatively easily achieved. Thus strategy focuses on patiently avoiding overt conflict as much as possible while “prefiguring” the new ways, primarily for educational/ideological purposes. The classic reference points are seen in the Zapatista and Rojavan cases, where the existence or establishment of a radically alternative world view leads directly to new structures and practices. At least there is a good chance that these can infiltrate under the radar of ruling classes, who will be less inclined to crush them than if they were directly confronted by armed rebellion.

This perspective is supported by the reasons outlined for thinking that present dominant socio-economic system is in the process of self-destruction (Trainer, 2020) and will have diminishing power to control deviance. If worsening circumstances lead people to see that the old systems will no longer provide for them and force them towards forming their own local and collective arrangements then those systems are likely to eventually be spontaneously dumped. Even if the outcome is not so smooth at least a transition strategy based on prefiguring is likely to minimize violent conflict.

Conclusion

The case for rejecting conventional development focuses firstly on the biophysical impossibility of achieving its goals; there are far too few resources to enable the Third World to rise to anything like present rich world lifestyles and systems. In addition it is inherently unjust; the “growth and trickle down” means mainly enrich the already rich, and ensure a global economy that transfers vast quantities of resource wealth out of poor countries.

The contradiction between conventional and alternative conceptions of development are of great and tragic significance. Billions of people struggle to survive in appalling conditions when these could quickly be largely eliminated if people were able to put the resources around them into creating the simple industries and systems that would meet most of their basic needs. But this could not be done until the rich ceased taking far more than their fair share of scarce global resources and unless the current development model which enables this is abandoned.

From the Simpler Way perspective the historically novel and unique conditions brought about by exceeding the limits to growth have determined that the present revolutionary situation is unlike any before it. In the past, revolutions have been primarily intended to liberate impoverished masses to rise to greater material wealth. But the goal of sustainable and just development must now be conceived in terms of radical and extensive Degrowth, localism, and above all willing acceptance of materially simpler lifestyles and systems. The supremely important determinants of this revolution are cultural and ideological; they are to do with recognition of the false claims of conventional development theory and practice, and the acceptance some kind of Simpler Way.

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