

Development

The term development, in use in the human sciences, refers to the improvement in living conditions and quality of life of a population, and is also linked to the social organisation that provides the framework in which well-being is produced. Defining this notion requires a distinction to be made between development and growth. Growth is a measure of the wealth produced in a given territory in one year, and its evolution from one year to another, and it is for instance taken into account in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country. It says nothing, however, about the social effects it produces. It gives only very little information on the standard of living, and even less on quality-of-life. Growth can contribute to development, but this is not always the case, and when the production of wealth is not accompanied by improvements in standards of living, this is referred to as growth without development. Conversely, even in the absence of growth, if priority is given to the most useful productions and to greater fairness in the distribution of the commodities produced, the living conditions of populations improve and this creates development.

Since it is the enhancement of well-being, development is thus more qualitative than quantitative. Despite this, the Indian economist Amartya Sen constructed a Human Development Indicator HDI (see the article: Measuring development).

Since quality of life cannot be reduced to material well-being, and also includes values such as social justice, self-esteem, and the quality of social relationships, development is closely linked to what is known as empowerment, which refers to the ability of an individual or a group to reach decisions on matters that concern them, and take part in citizen debate. Development cannot occur without the participation of the individuals concerned, in other words without democracy. Thus Amartya Sen puts the emphasis on the actual scope that individuals have, or do not have, for defining their project in life and for implementing that project in the real-life setting. This setting obviously depends on material resources, but also on parameters that are specific to each individual, such as health, and parameters relating to the social and political organisation, for instance the place allocated to each individual and his or her role. Thus development has economic, social and political aspects. Amartya Sen used the word capabilities to refer to the possibilities open to individuals and the freedom that individuals have to choose among them. He states that freedom appears as the ultimate end of development, but also as the main means to development. Thus development can be apprehended as a process of expansion of true freedoms enjoyed by individuals. Experiences in the course of history indeed show that authoritarian systems, in market and planned economies alike, have failed. Whether or not they produced strong growth, all have had to, have to or will have to change and open up to democracy to achieve development.

While development has changed the world since the industrial revolution in the 19th century, it has also accentuated contrasts between territories and their populations. Not only does development fail to remove the inequalities between places and people, it also creates them. However, setting the notion of developed countries against that of under-developed countries, which has been a central theme for many years, is open to discussion because of the lack of a clear threshold between the two categories to validate the distinction.

Development has been seen by some as a linear historical phenomenon liable to reach all humans in all places, but not at the same moment. This was the position of Eugen Rostow, who in fact was dealing with growth rather than development, and interpreted history as a succession of periods running from the so-called traditional society to the consumer society, with a decisive stage referred to as the "take-off", after which an accumulative process of wider production increases and diversifies the goods that can be used by humans, thus leading to a rise in living standards. Since some countries started on this path before others, it thus appeared coherent with this interpretation of the past to consider that the situation of poor countries corresponded to a historical time-lag.

It is however more convincing to envisage development inequalities across the world as resulting from asymmetrical relationships set up between developed countries and those said to be underdeveloped, as a result of the domination of one over the other. Colonisation was the most violent form, but it was not the only one. Under-development, according to numerous economists (André Gunder Frank, Celso Furtado), results from dependency towards the outside world, and some authors have chosen to refer to dominated or exploited countries rather than under-developed countries. This interpretation has led to developed countries being seen as centres exercising domination over a periphery made up of the under-developed countries (Samir Amin). Observations across the globe give considerable strength to this dependency theory. However reality is more complex. Development inequalities can be observed on all geographical scales, both in so-called developed countries and in so-called under-developed countries, between regions, between cities and rural areas, and between districts in one and the same city. The «centre-periphery» combination was systematised by Alain Reynaud in a general model offering an interpretation grid for territories at a given moment, and for the evolution in their relationships over time, in a geo-historical perspective.

This reflection has shown the inadequacy of the terminology. Indeed, inequalities result neither from a lagging behind by certain territories, nor from malfunctions in the development process. Inequalities are inherent in development itself, because it upsets existing hierarchies, creates new hierarchies, and produces dependencies and inequalities that are both social and spatial. The phrase unequal development has thus come to refer to the fact that inequality is a component of development, and can be observed on all geographical scales, so that it requires geographical analysis on many different scales. The logic of this is far-reaching. If we retain the idea set out earlier that development necessarily comprises a reference to justice or fairness, and if we agree that development is necessarily unequal, we need to explore what it is that makes these two statements compatible.

Following the economists, geographers took up the issue. Unequal development is indeed seen in the organisation of territories and its impact on the living conditions of the population, in urbanisation, in the density and the configuration of circulation networks, in the distribution of public amenities, in the intensity of economic activity, in the sharing of decisional processes, and in the asymmetries of flows. The geographical approach enables a refinement of the distinction made earlier between growth and development, and makes it possible to contrast what is "extraverted" growth and what is "inward-looking" or "centripetal" development. The first refers to growth that is oriented towards the outside, and dependent on the outside. Its activities, and hence its jobs, depend on decisions taken elsewhere, designed primarily to serve outside interests. Thus the effects locally are restricted, and often ambiguous. The plantation economy and mineral extraction in countries of the South are characteristic forms of this "extraverted" growth when they are operated by foreign firms paying low salaries and having sufficient control over international markets to maintain world prices at a low level. In contrast, we can refer to "inward-looking" or "centripetal" development when growth is designed and envisaged as serving the local populations. It is the result of social dynamics that create a favourable power balance with outside interests. Centripetal development can occur on the level of a city, or can concern a country gaining autonomy in relation to the outside world. It can also apply to a region, or even a sub-region, where "indigenous" economic forces are at work. This is referred to as local development, a notion that can be illustrated by Local Production Systems (LPS) such as the Choletais textile model in France or the Third Italy model.

Another issue is the damage caused by development to natural ecological balances, since it is difficult to envisage development without altering ecosystems. This problem went unnoticed for many decades because the natural environment had resilience and an ability to recover reasonable well. However a crisis has developed between society and the environment, and, in reaction to this, the notion of sustainable development has been propounded. This term is widely used by geographers, ecologists, economists and sociologists alike. It has been adopted into common language. The notion therefore needs to be understood for what it is: development that is sustainable with regard to the economy, socially fair, and sustainable environmentally. These three foundations of sustainable development are indissociable, but they can be articulated one with the other only if it is a democratic process that give coherence and efficacy to the system. Economic viability is required to enable production of material well-being. Social justice is required for the quality of life of all. Environmental sustainability is required in the interests of future generations. In the context of a development process, sustainability cannot however be reduced to the maintaining of the status quo. The environment that future generations will inherit must provide them with the necessary conditions to enable them to devise and implement their own development.

Thus the three foundations of sustainable development are not constraints whereby each needs to restrict ambitions and scope so as not to unsettle the other two. Development is not to be held back to avoid damaging the natural environment, nor should it be over-shy in terms of social justice in an attempt to avoid hampering the economy. A mode of development needs to be designed in which each of the dimensions is an asset for the system as a whole. Envisaged in this way, sustainable development is a difficult objective that some will view as utopian. Is this not because development is itself a form of utopia? Development is a process of enhancement of quality of life: it would be arbitrary to define the ultimate target of this process, but the course needs to be fixed.

Documents joints

[The Human development indicator](#)

Bibliographie