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Meaning, Measurement, and Morality in International Development

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we consider important concepts and ideas in the study of international development. We begin by discussing the birth, evolution, and implications of the term *development* and related nomenclature—such as *developing countries*, *Third World*, and *Global South*—used by academics, practitioners, and international organizations. We then turn to a critical examination of growth, inequality, and absolute and moderate poverty. This leads to discussion of “development” as a contested concept. Multi-dimensional approaches to development are considered in detail, particularly Amartya Sen’s capability approach and its translation into the Human Development Index. We also explore the ethics and morality of international development and look at various arguments for and against global redistributive justice by asking whether development assistance should be considered a moral obligation for rich countries and their citizens, or little more than an individual choice akin to a charitable donation. The chapter concludes by introducing the personal ethical dilemmas experienced by development practitioners and researchers, including the need to be attentive to power and positionality, as well as local norms of ethical and culturally sensitive behaviour.

VIDEO RESOURCES

Frost over the World: Talk with Amartya Sen. Al Jazeera English, 2010.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02J7ecw0FWI&feature=related>

Time 5:47

Professor Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University, addresses participants at the UNDP’s “Capacity is Development” global event via video message. The event was held on 17–19 March, 2010 in Marrakech, Morocco. In this message, he

emphasizes that institutions play a huge role in enabling people to fulfill all that they are capable of achieving in their lives. He added this key role is not only of state institutions but also of a larger network including freedom of information, a democracy that enables people to participate and express their views, and a well-functioning market.

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***Creating Capabilities.* Harvard University Press, 2011.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoD-cjduM40>

Time 9:40

If a country's gross domestic product increases each year, but so does the percentage of its people deprived of basic education, health care, and other opportunities, is that country really making progress? If we rely on conventional economic indicators, can we ever grasp how the world's billions of individuals are really managing?

In this video and in her book, *Creating Capabilities*, Martha Nussbaum argues that our dominant theories of development have given us policies that ignore our most basic human needs for dignity and self-respect. As an alternative to metrics like GDP, Nussbaum and the other members of the Human Development and Capability Association suggest that we should be asking what each human is actually capable of being and doing.

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***Ending Poverty – Thomas Pogge.* The RSA, 2012.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2w6BqUBghg>

Time 20:46

Influential political philosopher Thomas Pogge argues for a new global institutional commitment to the swift and complete eradication of severe poverty.

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***What alternative is there to GDP?* The European Commission, 2007.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3mVedLbMI0=>

Time 3:18

Gross domestic product, which measures the value of goods and services produced or provided in any given year, is the best-recognized measure of economic performance in the world. For many, a rise in economic growth—as measured by GDP—is shorthand for a rise in living standards and an increase in well-being. However, GDP has severe limitations as a human development indicator, as even one of the founders of the GDP concept, Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets, realized. The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income, he wrote in a 1934 report to the US congress. If the GDP is up, why is America down? Distinctions must be kept in between quantity and quality of growth, between costs and returns, and between the short and the long run. Goals for more growth should specify more growth of what and for what? GDP measures all economic activity: fighting crime, natural disasters, and environmental depletion—whether or not it contributes to an individual's well-being or a community's progress. This can produce some perverse results.

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***Hear our Voices –The Poor on Poverty.* World Bank, 2001.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KJSPEacHxw>

Time 31:07

Hear Our Voices—The Poor on Poverty explores the complexities of poverty from the perspectives of poor people themselves. It reveals that although the experiences of poor people vary widely by location and situation, there are significant commonalities in the way poor people describe their lives: sense of powerlessness and voicelessness; precariousness of their livelihoods and lack of security; isolation, humiliation, and lack of connections to resources and opportunities; and gender inequality. The result is a “domino effect” of disadvantages and inequalities, all of which make it difficult for poor people to escape the hold of poverty. *Hear Our Voices—The Poor on Poverty* introduces viewers to people who are challenging these obstacles, and initiatives that are helping to empower the poor, make their lives more secure, and give them access to greater opportunities.

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***Gary Haugen: The hidden reason for poverty the world needs to address now.* TED Talk, 2015.**

https://www.ted.com/talks/gary_haugen_the_hidden_reason_for_poverty_the_world_needs_to_address_now?language=en

Time 22:06

Collective compassion has meant an overall decrease in global poverty since the 1980s, says civil rights lawyer Gary Haugen. Yet for all the world’s aid money, there is a pervasive hidden problem keeping poverty alive. Haugen reveals the dark underlying cause we must recognize and act on now.

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***Richest 1% to own more than rest of world, Oxfam says.* BBC News, 2015.**

<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-30875633>

Time 2.06

The wealthiest 1% will soon own more than the rest of the world’s population, according to a study by anti-poverty charity Oxfam. The charity’s research shows that the share of the world’s wealth owned by the richest 1% increased from 44% in 2009 to 48% last year. On current trends, Oxfam says it expects the wealthiest 1% to own more than 50% of the world’s wealth by 2016.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is cosmopolitanism and how does it relate to international development?
2. What are the main problems with the use of GDP per capita as a measure of development? Discuss at least four problems in your answer.
3. What do the authors mean when they suggest that development researchers and practitioners “need to do more listening and less talking”?
4. Explain the concept of growth with equity. What is its importance to development theorists?
5. What are three possible reasons for the prevalence of inequality in the developing world?

6. What is the relevance of ethics to development issues?
7. Why does Amartya Sen argue that economic development does not reflect a good conception of development?
8. What does it mean to say that development is a multidimensional conception?

ANSWER KEY: REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Cosmopolitanism is a philosophical approach to ethics that views national borders as irrelevant to issues of justice. In other words, the cosmopolitan approach argues that the moral obligations we have as individuals are not limited by the boundaries of the country in which we live. As human beings, we have equal responsibilities to people everywhere, regardless of where they live. Thus, a cosmopolitan approach to development acts as a justification for acting to improve well-being and standards of living in developing countries, even though we may not be citizens of those countries.
2. Although GDP per capita is useful in comparing national economic performances from country to country, it has a number of weaknesses. First, the quality of the measurement depends on the data collected by government agencies, and therefore may be problematic. Second, it fails to account for non-market subsistence activities. And third, it tells us nothing about the extent of poverty in society (the distribution of income/wealth within the population). Countries that have high GDP growth rates may nonetheless have high rates of poverty, and given that development is focused in large part on poverty reduction, GDP per capita is ultimately an incomplete measurement of development.
3. The suggestion to listen more and talk less is related to the discussion of practical ethics in development. In particular, the notion is that development actors engage with local people in developing countries with greater respect and equality. Rather than lecturing those in developing countries on what they should be doing, a strong development ethic would be based on modesty and an understanding that there is not a single way of “doing” development. Such an attitude avoids past arrogance and efforts to present the Western view as the best approach.
4. The concept of “growth with equity” as a goal for development combines GDP growth with a more equitable distribution of the benefits of that growth, namely more benefits to the poor. This concept recognizes that growth by itself is important, but is not sufficient without considering equality as well. Growth that disproportionately benefits the already-wealthy to the exclusion of the poor is not an ideal pathway to development.
5. Three potential explanations for the existence of inequality in many developing countries are (1) the impact of colonial rule and neo-colonial relations; (2) a reduced employment effect of GDP growth due to the capital-intensive nature of late-industrialization; and (3) weak or absent social safety nets and regressive tax policies.
6. The most important relevance of ethics is raised when the issues of justice are taken into account. Indeed, justice requires a moral obligation in addressing the needs of the poor. In undertaking such obligations, as cosmopolitans put it, our obligation for justice not only is related to fellow citizens, but also, extends beyond borders. In addition, development practitioners and researchers working in the developing world, must be sensitive to the issues of justice. This means that those who work on the front line “need ethical frames by which they can better understand their situation, structure their choices, avoid debilitating degrees of doubt and guilt, and move forward.”
7. Development is a multidisciplinary conception. Central in this conception is people’s rights to food, education, health care, adequate housing, security, justice, and civil and political rights. That is why Sen’s approach to development is rightly called development as freedom. That is the reason why Sen argues that development should not be seen simply as rising income levels but rather as an increase in individuals’ substantive freedoms.
8. Simply speaking it means that the good development is more than the sole economic growth. Originating from Sen’s capability approach, the UN Human Development Index (HDI) is the

best reflection of multidimensionality of development. As a composite measure of development, HDI draws on three equally weighted factors: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and standard of living. Similarly, almost all ethicists of development believe that development must be seen as a multidimensional concept.