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# Development as a buzzword

*Gilbert Rist*

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*Despite its widespread usage, the meaning of the term ‘development’ remains vague, tending to refer to a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of social progress rather than to anything more precise. After presenting a brief history of the term, the author argues that not only will development fail to address poverty or to narrow the gap between rich and poor, but in fact it both widens and deepens this division and ultimately creates poverty, as natural resources and human beings alike are increasingly harnessed to the pursuit of consumption and profit. The survival of the planet will depend upon abandoning the deep-rooted belief that economic growth can deliver social justice, the rational use of environment, or human well-being, and embracing the notion that there would be a better life for all if we moved beyond ‘development’.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Governance and Public Policy; Rights

## The meaning(s) of ‘development’

To regard ‘development’ as a buzzword strikes me as highly apposite, for although it has been in vogue for almost 60 years (a record indeed!) its actual meaning is still elusive, since it depends on where and by whom it is used.<sup>1</sup> It is also part of the ordinary buzz or hubbub to be heard in countless meetings devoted to issues ranging from agriculture, urban planning, and international trade to poverty reduction, personal well-being, and industrial production. Everyone may use it as she or he likes, to convey the idea that tomorrow things will be better, or that more is necessarily better. But there is more to it than that. To ‘get a buzz from something’ also means ‘to get a boost’ or ‘to be perked up’. In this respect, ‘development’ has beyond doubt been widely used as a hard drug, addiction to which, legally tolerated or encouraged, may stimulate the blissful feelings that typify artificial paradises. So it may also be legitimate to regard the word ‘development’ as toxic.

Strangely enough, the international career of the term ‘development’, coupled with the notion of ‘underdevelopment’, started as a ‘public relations gimmick thrown in by a professional speech-writer’,<sup>2</sup> since President Truman merely wanted to include in his 1949 Inaugural Address a fourth point that would sound ‘a bit original’. So from the very beginning, when the idea was first aired in international circles, no one – not even the US President – really knew what ‘development’ was all about. This did not, however, prevent the word from gaining wide acceptance.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this unintentional stroke of genius turned the two

antagonists – colonisers vs. colonised – into seemingly equal members of the same family, henceforth considered either more or less ‘developed’. The dominant view was that time – but also money and political will – would suffice to fill the gap between the two sides.

This global promise of generalised happiness had immediate appeal, not only for those who expected an improvement in their living conditions, but also for those who were committed to international social justice. In other words, ‘development’ – with all the hopes and expectations that it conveyed – was at first taken very seriously, even by those who were later to count among its critics. As Teresa Hayter recalls, in the 1960s ‘there was little attempt [...] to define development. Instead, there was an unquestioned assumption [...] that “development”, whatever it was, could lead to improvement in the situation of poor people’ (Hayter 2005: 89). This comment gives a clue to the reasons why the word ‘development’ started buzzing in dominant parlance: it rested on a mere – albeit unquestioned – assumption, and no one cared to define it properly. Both elements characterise a buzzword: an absence of real definition, and a strong belief in what the notion is supposed to bring about.<sup>4</sup> ‘Development’ therefore became a sort of performative word: saying by doing. Any measure (foreign investment, lowering – or raising – of trade barriers, well-digging, literacy campaigns, and the like) was from now on justified ‘in the name of development’, making even the most contradictory policies look as if they were geared to ‘improving the lives of poor people’. This extensive use of the term ‘development’ to delineate policies that were assumed to be necessarily good also helped to build up new schemas for perceptions of reality. In other words, ‘development’ was no longer considered a social construct or the result of political will, but rather the consequence of a ‘natural’ world order<sup>5</sup> that was deemed just and desirable. This trick – which is at the root of what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’<sup>6</sup> – has been highly instrumental in preventing any possible critique of ‘development’, since it was equated almost with life itself.

‘Development’ also did sterling service during the Cold War period. At that time, the Great Powers disagreed on almost all issues except one: ‘development’, the magic word that reconciled opposite sides. Its necessity and desirability were not debatable, and the two ideological adversaries vied with each other in promoting it across what was then known as the Third World. To be sure, there was some shared and genuine intention to improve the lot of the poor, viewed as potentially interesting future customers of the industrialised countries, but beyond the routine discourse on ‘the challenge of our times’, ‘development’ was mainly used as an excuse for enticing ‘developing countries’ to side with one camp or the other. No wonder, therefore, that this political game turned to the advantage of the ruling ‘elites’ who were influential in international arenas, rather than grassroots populations. But this lasted only for a time, since it was easy to see through. Progressively, ‘white elephants’ and gargantuan projects came under criticism and, after two ‘development decades’ – promulgated under the auspices of the United Nations – had failed to deliver the goods, a generalised ‘development fatigue’ overcame both developed and developing countries.

The buzz seemed to fade away, but the catchword had proved so helpful in sanctifying so many different ventures and in giving them an aura of legitimacy that every effort had to be made to restore its former lustre. This was indeed no easy task, but the solution was found by adding to the word ‘development’ a series of adjectives that were supposed to dignify it. Thanks to the experts’ imagination, ‘development’ was successively qualified as ‘endogenous’, ‘human’, ‘social’, and, eventually, ‘sustainable’ – as if, when standing alone, ‘development’ had become a dirty word. Why was it suddenly necessary to specify that ‘development’ had to be ‘human’? Was it a form of tacit avowal that, left to its plain meaning, it could also be inhuman? This might have been the case, but no one seriously raised the question.

The height of absurdity was reached when the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) tried to reconcile the contradictory requirements to be met in order to protect the environment from pollution, deforestation, the greenhouse effect, and climatic change and, at the same time, to ensure the pursuit of economic growth that was still considered a condition for general happiness. This impossible task resulted in the coining of the catchy phrase 'sustainable development', which immediately achieved star status.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately it only meant exchanging one buzzword for another. 'Sustainable development became a global slogan that all could readily endorse, and one that was sufficiently vague to allow different, often incompatible interpretations' (South Centre 2002:15). Again, it is impossible to bring together a real concern for environment and the promotion of 'development'. 'Sustainable development' is nothing but an oxymoron, a rhetorical figure that joins together two opposites such as 'capitalism with a human face' or 'humanitarian intervention'.<sup>8</sup> The defenders of the environment and of economic growth respectively were both eager to claim that they drew their inspiration from the same notion, which could be used for different purposes. Hence the battle to define what 'sustainable development' is really about. But Brundtland's plea for a 'new era of economic growth' was certainly not in favour of those who considered environmental sustainability a top priority. It is true that concern for protecting the environment has grown recently, but this can hardly be attributed to the popularity enjoyed by the idea of 'sustainable development'. If an increasing number of people – everywhere and at all levels of society – feel that something has to be done to lessen the impact of human activity on the biosphere, this is rather due to the mounting environmental crises that we are witnessing, from recurrent hurricanes to the melting icecap, or from progressive desertification of large inhabited areas to urban pollution. And yet, 'development' – be it sustainable or not – remains high on the agenda, and no one seems about to forsake it.

So far, I have concentrated on the reasons why 'development' has survived despite (or because of) its ambiguities. But its persistence as a vogue word in economic and political discourse also rests on an even more important foundation, namely that 'development' corresponds to a generalised and firmly rooted modern belief. Without entering into too much theoretical detail, it should be remembered that, according to Durkheim, no society can exist without religion, since religion is an 'eminently social thing' and religious representations 'express collective realities' (Durkheim 1995:9). Religion, in this sense, has therefore nothing to do with the commonsense view that associates it with the idea of the supernatural or with intimate personal convictions regarding the existence of God and with attendance at church or mosque. It relates to the belief of a given social group in certain indisputable truths, a belief that determines compulsory behaviour in such a way as to strengthen social cohesion (Rist 1997: 20). In any (democratic) society, various ideologies, whether or not they are related to political parties, are tolerated; but, in Durkheim's sense, religious beliefs are, as it were, above ideologies; they are shared by all, as everyone believes that any person belonging to the social group also shares these beliefs (despite possible private disagreement). They are beyond dispute and entail various practices on the part of believers who cannot evade them without endangering the cohesion of the group or risking being considered social outcasts.

This summary account of the concept of religion should help to explain why 'development' can be considered one of the indisputable truths that pervade our modern world.<sup>9</sup> Whatever their ideological creed, no politician would dare to run on an election platform that ignores economic growth or 'development', which is supposed to reduce unemployment and create new jobs and well-being for all. Small investors and ordinary people expect an increase in profits or wages that is supposed to follow a 'secular trend'. 'Development' has become a modern shibboleth, an essential password for anyone who wishes to improve his or her standard of living.

## A down-to-earth definition

The undeniable success of ‘development’, linked to its undeniable failures in improving the condition of the poor, therefore needs to be called into question.<sup>10</sup> The time has come to get rid of this buzzword and demystify the beliefs associated with it. To neutralise the damaging power of a buzzword amounts to producing a down-to-earth definition that plainly states what it is all about and what it actually promotes. In this particular case, the difficulty lies in the *a priori* positive meaning of the word ‘development’, which derives both from its supposedly ‘natural’ existence and from its inclusion in a cluster of unquestionable shared beliefs. This is why those who are ready to recognise that ‘development’ has not really kept its promises are also loath to discard the notion altogether. Failures, they would say, do not result from ‘development’ itself, but rather from erroneous interpretation or ill-considered implementation. Even in the most dramatic situations it is always possible to appeal to the presumed existence of a ‘good development’. After all, God himself may not answer all our prayers or grant all our requests, but his righteousness remains beyond doubt. . .

So, to formulate a proper, sociological, definition of ‘development’, one has to put aside its emotional and normative connotations and also to incorporate all the external characteristics – which anyone can observe – that are related to the subject matter. In other words, the definition of ‘development’ should not be based on what one thinks it is or what one wishes it to be, but on actual social practices and their consequences, i.e. things that anyone can identify. What needs to be highlighted is an historical process that concerns not only the countries of the ‘South’, or only operations conducted under the umbrella of ‘development co-operation’, which started some two centuries ago and continuously transforms our world.<sup>11</sup>

On this basis and to put it in a nutshell, my definition reads as follows: *the essence of ‘development’ is the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations in order to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by means of market exchange, to effective demand.* This formulation may appear scandalous compared with the wishful thinking that usually characterises definitions of ‘development’. But I contend that it truly reflects the actual process observable when a country or a region is ‘developing’. (For a more detailed formulation, see Rist 1997: 12–18.)

First, as far as the natural environment is concerned, it is well documented that the industrialisation process in England took place alongside the enclosure movement. In other words, open fields or commons that anyone could use became private property, to be bought or sold. ‘Development’ starts when land is transformed into what Polyani (1957) calls a ‘fictitious commodity’, and when the natural environment is turned into a ‘resource’. The progress of the Industrial Revolution, along with increased demand for energy, led to the exploitation of new mineral and non-renewable resources. Ore was transformed into steel to be used in the production of new objects, and oil was transformed into exhaust gas: in both cases, destruction is the reverse side of production – a fact that goes unnoticed by the economist – since recycling is either problematic (requiring new energy costs) or impossible. And, of course, the whole process ends up in increased pollution. But the exploitation of the natural environment does not stop there. Anything can be converted into a commodity and, therefore, into an opportunity for profit. Hence the tremendous efforts made by transnational corporations in favour of licensing procedures to appropriate all kinds of living organisms and biodiversity generally. The best-known example is that of farmers who are no longer able to use part of the previous harvest to sow their crops and are forced to buy new seed every year. A country is the more ‘developed’ the more limited the number of free things that are available: to spend an afternoon on the beach, to go fishing, or enjoy cross-country skiing is nowadays impossible unless one is prepared to pay for it.

With regard to social relations, the picture is no different, since these are also subject to the rule of commodity and exploitation. The major change took place with the gradual generalisation of wage-labour in modern societies, i.e. when labour also became another 'fictitious commodity', to use Polanyi's phrase. What used to be freely exchanged within the family circle or among neighbours has been progressively converted into paid employment. Since everyone has to earn a living, expensive day nurseries have replaced grandparents in looking after small children, marriage bureaux have replaced village dances as opportunities for those in quest of marriage partners, and the tedious chore of walking the dog twice a day can be contracted out to a jobless person keen to make a little money. Such is life in a fully 'developed' country. . . . These anecdotal examples may be laughable, but they are also indicative of a sweeping trend that is jeopardising social bonds. What used to be intimate and personal, supposedly outside the realm of the market, can today be the object of a contract for paid services, such as the practices of womb-leasing, drawing on sperm banks, or buying 'human spare parts' (eyes, kidneys, livers, etc.) from the destitute or condemned in 'Southern' countries. Finally, in a 'developed' country, human beings are also turned into 'resources' and are expected to know how to sell themselves to potential employers. Prostitution may be officially condemned, but it has become the common lot: everyone is for sale.

To complete this already rather grim description of what 'development' is really about, one should add an inventory of its devastating side effects, not only on the environment and the precarious equilibrium of the biosphere, or on the conservation of natural resources (forests, arable land, fish stocks) which are overexploited, but above all on the continuous impoverishment of millions of people. As Jeremy Seabrook (1998) has it, poverty is not a form of 'illness' that demonstrates the malfunctioning of capitalism and can be 'cured'. On the contrary, poverty is proof of the 'good health' of the capitalist system: it is the spur that stimulates new efforts and new forms of accumulation. To put it differently, economic growth – widely hailed as a prerequisite to prosperity – takes place only at the expense of either the environment or human beings. World segregation is such that those who enjoy a so-called 'high standard of living' hardly come into contact with the poor and may thus cherish the illusion that their privileged circumstances may sooner or later spread to humankind as a whole. But climatic change, the greenhouse effect, and nuclear clouds cannot be contained and may affect everyone, rich and poor alike, perhaps in the not-too-distant future. This is the real meaning and the real danger of globalisation. It first and foremost concerns the globe, or our 'blue planet', and its fragile balance, which is being progressively destabilised by human activities, and not – as we are given to believe – international trade, new information and communication technologies, or round-the-clock stock-market trading.

It should be clear by now why 'development' must be considered a toxic word, as I half-jokingly suggested at the beginning of this article. As a buzzword, it has been used time and again to promote a system that is neither viable, nor sustainable, nor fit to live in. The (substantial) benefits that it still confers on a tiny minority are not enough to justify its continuing acceptance, in view of the lethal dangers that it entails. This is being progressively, if reluctantly, admitted. The question therefore remains: given the amount of information that scientists have gathered on the manifold natural (actually human-made) hazards that may impinge on our daily lives, why is it that we do not believe in what we know to be certain? The answer, probably, lies in the fact that our belief in 'development' is still too strong to be undermined by scientific certainty. Our collective behaviour is strangely determined by what Levy-Bruhl, almost a century ago, described as the 'pre-logical mentality' held to be characteristic of 'primitive peoples'! A radical change of mind is therefore required in order to anticipate possible – or likely – catastrophes. The idea is not to revive the figure of the prophet of doom, nor to wring one's hands, but to take the impending catastrophe so seriously that it will eventually not happen



(Dupuy 2002): just as the Japanese anticipate earthquakes or tsunamis, take catastrophes for granted, adapt their behaviour to this conviction and enforce anti-seismic construction standards so that, when earthquakes actually occur, casualties are minimal in comparison with what would happen in other countries. From then on, we must resort to the heuristic of fear, to anticipate what we might experience when the worst happens, in order to prevent it from happening, instead of deluding ourselves with the unverified idea, implicit in the notion of 'development', that tomorrow things will be better.

A change could be conceivable if we recall the Amerindian wisdom that teaches us that 'we hold the Earth in trust for our children'. But it also entails changes in our daily life, particularly in the Northern hemisphere. These are often presented, in a moralistic tone, as a way of vindicating austerity or as a rationing process. But these measures should be considered as entailing not a loss, but rather a gain: there is a positive side to restoring a sense of limits. Instead of viewing 'development' as the history of progress, we could also look upon it as *eine Verlustsgeschichte*, a history of successive losses – which, again, mainly concerns not only the natural environment, but also social bonds and conviviality.<sup>12</sup>

The time has come – and it is indeed high time – to debunk the 'development' buzzword. To do so means that we must define it properly – relying on actual social practices, rather than wishful thinking. We must be aware of its inclusion in a corpus of beliefs that are difficult to shatter, expose its mischievous uses, and denounce its consequences. The most important thing, however, is to make it plain that there is life after 'development' – certainly a different one from what we in the privileged regions are used to, but there is no evidence to suggest that we would lose on such a deal.

## Notes

1. To my knowledge, there is no French word that could properly translate 'buzzword'. Hence I opted for the challenge of writing this article in English, even if playing on and with words in another language is always risky. I am therefore grateful to Roy Turnill for revising an earlier version of this essay.
2. The appalling history of the drafting of Point IV of President Truman's Inaugural Address of 20 January 1949, in which the idea of 'development' vs. 'underdevelopment' was launched, is related by Louis J. Halle, who served at the time in the State Department. See his article: 'On teaching International Relations', *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 40(1), Winter 1964 (reprint, no pagination). The phrase 'public relations gimmick' is Halle's.
3. For a more detailed presentation of this episode, see Rist 1997, pp. 70 *et seq.*
4. The process leading to the creation of buzzwords or 'plastic words' is highlighted by Pörksen 1995. See also Rist 2002.
5. The linkage of 'development' (or growth) with nature can be traced back to Aristotle: in Greek, the noun 'nature' (*phusis*) derives from the verb *phuo* (to grow, to develop). For plants, animals, human beings, or institutions, to behave 'according to its nature' simply means 'to develop'.
6. The expression 'symbolic violence' has been coined to explain how those who wield power exert their domination with the tacit consent of the dominated party, by imposing a particular world view, usually considered to be 'natural'. From then on, there is no choice but to match one's behaviour to it and thus to reinforce it. See Bourdieu 1980: 215 *et seq.* and Rist 2006.
7. In fact, the term was already used at a United Nations Seminar in 1979 and in a study jointly sponsored in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN): *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resources Conservation for Sustainable Development*.
8. In poetic or mystical writings, expressions such as 'dark brightness' or 'presence of the absent God' are not out of place, as they produce an excess of meaning without establishing a hierarchy between the signifiers. But the Brundtland Report was neither a poem nor a mystical utterance.

9. Since religious beliefs come in clusters, one could identify some other 'truths' that pertain to the same corpus, such as 'democracy', 'human rights', 'market', etc., but that would go beyond the ambit of this article. To question one means questioning all of them. See also Perrot *et al.* 1992.
10. According to UNDP statistics, the gap between the 20 per cent poorest and the 20 per cent richest of the world has more than doubled over the last 40 years of so-called development aid.
11. As a symbolic date to mark the beginning of the process, 1776 is probably the most appropriate. It corresponds to the publication by Adam Smith of the *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (the beginning of economics); the Declaration of Independence of the United States (first occurrence of the concept of human rights); and the perfecting by James Watt of the steam engine (production of energy based on fossil ore – coal – rather than wind- or water-mills).
12. I hasten to say that I am not against electricity, antibiotics, or the Internet. I do not suggest 'going back' (which would be nonsense) to caves. I do not think that people are happy just because they are poor. But I am convinced that economic growth, as such, is unable to solve (and is rather likely to increase) the survival problems of those who are faced with water pollution, depletion of fish resources, desertification etc., not to mention the millions of displaced persons in the wake of international or civil wars who are the first victims of the 'growth' in the arms industry.

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