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# ACCESS TO RESOURCES AN URBAN AGENDA

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# What is ‘Development’?

*Niclas Hällström*

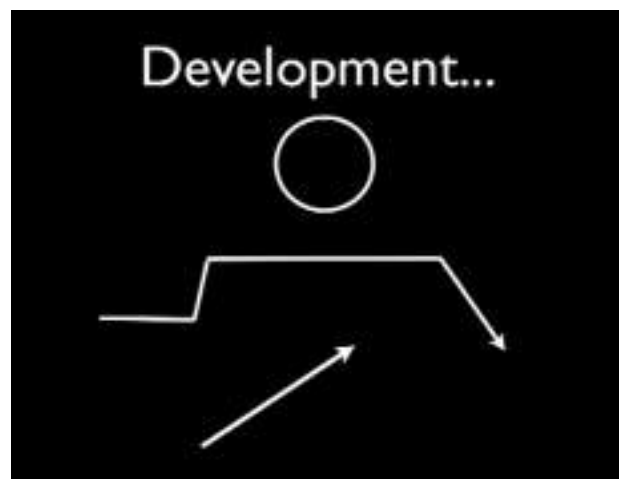
## Introduction

Imagine yourself living inside a huge balloon. Your universe is all that’s inside the balloon, its painted inner surface what you think is the distant edge of everything that counts and is relevant. As you’ve spent your whole life inside this balloon, it’s difficult to imagine there could be other balloons with other creatures, seeing very different universes. In fact, it would be difficult to even realise that you’re in a balloon – what you see is all is you know of the universe.

Could the balloon metaphor be applied on the contested concept of ‘Development’, this word that has come to define so much of how we look at and understand society? I would like to argue so, and claim that in order to understand much of the fundamental challenges the world is facing – climate change, biodiversity loss, rampant consumerism, destruction of local cultures and knowledge of sustainability – we must unpack some of the assumptions and world-views into which western cultures and the growing middle classes and elites globally seem to be trapped by prevailing ideas of ‘Development’.

‘Development’ has become an over-riding belief, beyond ideology – and similar to religion. While we may debate its details and nuances, the big picture and overall trajectory seems so clear we don’t even reflect on it: a force of nature where humanity moves along a linear path, upwards, forward – some societies ahead, others lagging behind, but all supposedly aiming towards the same destiny. This is the journey towards ‘Progress’ and ‘Modernity’, and it seems unstoppable! While undeniably bringing many good things, ‘Development’ also legitimises destruction, abuses, and brutal large-scale interventions because ‘there is no alternative’. The only thing that can rectify any unfortunate detours and problems from Development is more Development. For many, there is (apparently) no other trajectory to consider.

**Box: What do these images symbolise? Think before you turn the page...**



The images symbolise three different notions of 'Development'. The first image illustrates the non-linear, cyclical world-views of many indigenous cultures, with the recognition that it is inherently difficult to understand the deeper meaning of this cosmivision if one is shaped in the traditions of linear, western mainstream development thinking. However, it should be recognised that the vast majority of human societies have been, and probably still are, shaped by this kind of worldview.

The second image shows the Christian idea that life on earth would, despite some advances, eventually come to a drastic brutal end – Armageddon – a notion that dominated the worldview of Europeans until the era of Enlightenment and belief in everlasting progress eventually gained ground.

The idea of continuing growth, development and progress (the third image) is thus a very particular notion that has, even in Europe, only existed for a few hundred years.

### **The history of 'Development'**

While the roots of development thinking are relatively modern, the very term 'Development' is an even more recent concept. Some believe the notion really took off in current social discourse as late as 1949 when President Truman in his inaugural speech famously outlined how the United States would, as he declared 'embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'. Truman stated further:

'For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and skills to relieve the suffering of these people. The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for assistance of other peoples is limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible.... Experience shows that our commerce with other countries expands as they progress industrially and economically. Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge.'<sup>1</sup>

While at first sight seemingly harmless and well-intentioned, Truman's speech is revealing and broke new ground in several ways. Most importantly, it embodied the new notion that 'Development' was not just something that happened to societies, it was something that could be intentionally done to societies. It was possible to 'develop' countries. Second, the speech effectively divided the whole world into one continuum – with the fortunate 'developed' countries at one end (with the US in the lead), and the unfortunate 'underdeveloped' countries at the other.

The coloniser/colonised dichotomy was replaced by one of 'developed/underdeveloped', relegating the rich diversity of cultures, other civilisations and nations in the non-European/non-North American parts of the world to the status of being primitive and 'underdeveloped'. As Gustavo Esteva wrote: 'For those who make up two-thirds of the world's population today, to think of development – of any kind of development – requires first the perception of

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<sup>1</sup> Rist, G. 2009. *The History of Development: From Western origins to global faith*. London: Zed books.

themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries'.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, this gradation placed all countries in the same linear framework with the understanding that all could (at least theoretically and with the assistance of the advanced, and technologically and culturally superior countries) at some point also become 'developed'. In fact, the very term 'Development' invites such linear thinking. The Latin meaning of the word – 'unfolding' – generally means a predictable, increase in complexity and sophistication according to an in-built plan, exemplified by the many notions in biology such as the development of an embryo into a baby, or a seed into a plant.

Over the last half-century, the concept of 'Development' has taken centre-stage in our collective understanding of global society. This one particular way of viewing societies and the way they change over time has become a norm. As we shall see, there have been different ideas – and often fierce debates – on *how* to bring about 'Development', how to accelerate the 'Development' process, and how to interfere with it to emphasise certain goals. Yet the idea of 'Development' as such has hardly been questioned at all within mainstream thinking.

### **Mainstream and counterpoint**

Let us, then, attempt to unpack the idea of 'Development' by applying the notions of "mainstream and counterpoint", drawing on the work of the respected development theorist Björn Hettne.<sup>3</sup> Simple but powerful, Hettne's framework is highly useful when trying to capture the various dimensions of 'Development'.

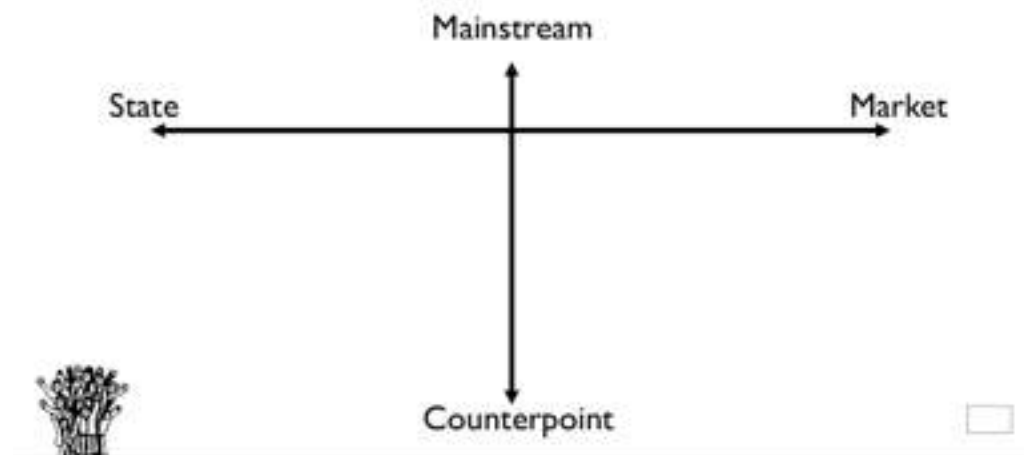
In essence, mainstream/counterpoint provides an additional dimension to the usual left/right political scale that most contemporary debates and societal dialogues are set against. This framework recognises the existence of parallel discourses or paradigms where the mainstream clearly dominates and often appears as the only possible framework for those who are born into it (our balloon of the opening example). The counterpoint, on the other hand, provides a contrasting and often radically different interpretation but may not even be seen or recognised by the mainstream. The counterpoint, however, is painfully aware of the mainstream, which it sees as wrong, and something to replace as soon as possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Esteva, G. 1992 'Development', in *Development Dictionary*, edited by W. Sachs. London: Zed Books. (page 7)

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Hettne's *Development Theory and the Three Worlds* (1995) and the later *Thinking about Development* (2009).

# Mainstream and Counterpoint



## The mainstream

So what are some of the characteristics of this mainstream development thinking?

- The notion that development is **linear** and not (as in many indigenous cultures) a worldview based on a more cyclical understanding of reality. There is a 'natural' and clear direction and progression towards higher and more 'advanced' stages of development, with at its core the belief in the possibility and desirability of continuous economic growth. It proposes that all the societies of the world are moving along the same track, with some in the lead and many others lagging behind, just waiting, with the right incentives, to catch up. That some are far behind has nothing to do with those ahead – who are simply those fortunate enough in having had an early start.<sup>4</sup>
- Its **Eurocentric** roots and basis. Clearly, the European (and later North American) experience of the last couple of centuries is a unique historical experience. Yet, an essentially colonialist and often racist mindset has allowed the translation of such a particular historical experience into universal blueprint. Why is it that the modernisation and industrialisation experience of Europe/North America should be considered an inevitable, 'natural' destiny (and aspiration) for all societies? It is interesting to note here how the European views of the 'other' have shifted over time. Early European 'discoverers' of other parts of the world often reported home about impressive, highly 'developed' civilisations they encountered, with sophisticated and often superior science and art.

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<sup>4</sup> An influential book, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A non-communist manifesto*, published in 1960 by the US economist and political scientist Walt Rostow formulated this notion in a strikingly clear way. Rostow claimed that all societies moves through five stages, from primitive, 'traditional societies' to the 'preconditions for take-off', to the 'take-off' stage, move on to the 'drive to maturity' and finally reach the end, mature stage of 'mass consumption' – they are finally 'developed'. While few would agree with such a firm categorization today, the underlying linear understanding of 'development stages' still prevails to a considerable degree.

- The view of development as **spontaneous, unavoidable** and **irreversible** – a force of nature that cannot be stopped and hardly even re-directed. Most of us have to a considerable degree internalized the ideas that there is no way of turning back, and that history has to take its course. The ‘forces of development’ are often clad in terms of laws of nature: they are simply unstoppable, just as the germinating seed will force its way through the asphalt as it ‘develops’ into a flower.
- The idea that this Eurocentric experience of development can be seen as a **universal phenomenon**, applicable to all other cultures without problems. Differences between societies reflect only different positions along the development trajectory rather than qualitative and fundamental differences in values, history, ecological realities, social norms, world-views, reciprocal systems for interaction and so on.
- The importance placed on **the individual** rather than community. Much of mainstream economics and development thinking has been shaped by the idea that individuals maximising their own narrow self-interest is what drives societies and explains the way they function. Hence the idea of individual entrepreneurs as a key driving force for speeding up the process of development has often been favoured, much in line with the importance of ‘economic man’ in economic theory.
- The centrality of **state and business** as drivers of development and society in general, with relatively little attention given to community and the various forms of both tradition and newer forms of ‘civil society’ organisations. Various political ideologies have differed in their views of the desirability of the state versus the private business sector as the key drivers for development, but build on the idea that these are indeed the key forces shaping societies.
- The supremacy of **science** as the dominant and most legitimate form of knowledge, and the belief in new technologies as prime drivers of progress. The mainstream development view of science tends towards an ‘apolitical’ understanding of science as an objective, neutral, rational progressive force, rather than an area where power, values, subjectivity, intuition and instrumentalism for political ends is prevalent and where there is no guarantee that its impacts and consequences on society are positive overall.
- And, lastly, perhaps an ‘**aesthetic**’ dimension. Mainstream development seems to a considerable degree to be shaped by ideals of uniformity, simplicity, and universality. There is an aesthetic in a linear, predictable, mechanical Newtonian world that can be understood through straightforward cause and effect. The desire to see the world in such a clean, structured and linear manner likely subconsciously constrains our ability to see the world in a much more mysterious, complex, contradictory way full of place-bound particularities, exceptions, relativism and dynamic, unpredictable, non-linear phenomena.

### **The counterpoint**

Perhaps the most striking feature of the mainstream/counterpoint dichotomy is its obvious asymmetry. While a mainstream understanding of development may be completely oblivious to (and can easily dismiss) any other worldview, the



opposite is true for the counterpoint. By its very definition it is always in opposition, painfully aware of the power and presence of the mainstream, of 'established truths', of what is politically correct, of undeniable power relations. To adhere to counterpoint notions of development means to constantly question and try to break the status quo.

Counterpoint perspectives are thus often the negation or opposition to the core premises characterising the mainstream development belief system described above. They are pluralistic and recognise that 'Development' can not be something universal to be imposed upon all societies. Counterpoint notions of development are explicitly normative and political/ideological, highlighting values such as equity, reciprocity and egalitarianism. They depart from notions of the 'disadvantaged' and 'victims' and are more closely connected to people's lived realities and is fundamental in struggles for survival, be they physical, cultural or both. Civil society – or the 'Third Sector' – and bottom-up perspectives play a central role, and are seen as at least as important in shaping society and incurring change than either the government or business sectors.

The counterpoint refutes the idea of a linear, predictable and universal development trajectory and fundamentally questions much of mainstream economics and the supremacy of ideas of economic growth. And, of course, the counterpoint strives to become the new mainstream, just as in other realms one can find inspiring historical examples of 'marginal' 'utopian' counterpoint positions eventually becoming established as the new mainstream: the anti-slavery movement, women's emancipation, civil rights and universal suffrage are just a few examples.

## **Development thinking over time**

How, then, can the mainstream/counterpoint framework be applied to development thinking over the last half-century?

### ***Mainstream development models***

After a long period of dominance by largely *Keynesian* ideas of strong and active state involvement in the economy in European settings, the pendulum swung the other way from the early 1980s with *neo-liberal* ideals favouring the free market and minimal state intervention. As the model of state communism came to an abrupt end with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neo-liberal thinking became in essence the only game in town, leading to considerable cut-backs in government spending on social welfare and massive surges of privatisation.

The contrast between the neo-liberal ideology of privatisation and individual freedom on the one hand, and that of state communism with the state in full control of the economy and constrained individual rights on the other hand, may at first seem total. Yet there is more that *unites* these extremes than differs. They are all part of mainstream development thinking. They only differ significantly on the role of the state versus business, that is in the traditional left/right dimension. In most other respects there are no differences – their common belief in modernisation, progress, the importance of science and technology (recall the numerous technology 'races' between the Soviet Union and the US over the decades), their claims for universality, their common Eurocentric roots and views of other areas of the world as underdeveloped and waiting to replicate the experience of 'developed' countries.

### ***Structuralism***

Structuralist (and Dependency theories of development below) can both be described as counterpoint in that they question the mainstream assumption that a country's 'level of development' has no relation to other countries' 'development trajectory', and that in theory it is possible for all countries to catch up and replicate the journey of the 'advanced' countries. Coming out of Latin America in the 1950s, the Structuralists pointed out that there are *structural* barriers preventing countries in the global south from catching up.

Unfavourable terms of trade favoured the old colonial powers who could sell expensive, advanced industrial goods to the south, while benefitting from the cheap import of raw materials from their former colonies. The result: a continually widening gap between rich and poor countries – not a catching up on development. The Structuralists proposed 'import substitution strategies' (that is, trade barriers and domestic subsidies) to protect and boost the emerging, vulnerable industries in developing countries and demanded reforms of the global economy, with fairer trade conditions. Through an unprecedented coming together, facilitated by the Non-Aligned Movement and the OPEC oil price cartel, in 1974 developing countries even managed to have a resolution on the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) passed at the UN General Assembly (which was however quickly ignored as neo-liberal leaders Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power in the early 1980s).

### ***The Dependency school***

The Dependency school went a few steps further than the Structuralists. While sharing the view that structures and power matter, they argued that the problem was much deeper than unfavourable and unfair trade. In fact, development and underdevelopment' were two sides of the same coin. 'Underdevelopment' exists *because* of 'development' and vice versa. They are both a direct result of hundreds of years of colonial history. The rich, 'developed' countries, they argued, have become wealthy because of the exploitation and destruction of other societies.

Most developing countries were not 'late starters' stuck in some primordial 'natural' and primitive stage of development. Rather, they were severely torn and ruptured by a brutal history that has created patterns of *dependency*. Even after formal political independence these dependencies remained. The world could be understood as *centre-periphery* dependencies linked over many levels, where the periphery was consistently exploited by the centre, which in turn was also a periphery exploited by a centre at a yet higher level. Thus, the poor farmer in a developing country is linked through these power relations and dependencies to the centre of the centre, be it the US president or the largest multinational corporations, for example.

While perhaps more successful in its critical analysis than in formulating clear prescriptions, the conclusions of the Dependency school were radical: tinkering on the margins as the Structuralists proposed would achieve nothing. Rather, the whole power system would need to be tackled and perverse dependencies broken. One conclusion was to break with the West and look towards self-reliance and south-south cooperation.

### **Alternative development**

While both the Structuralists and the Dependency school challenged the mainstream on its Eurocentrism and simplistic ‘staircase’ metaphor, they still embodied many of the other mainstream notions of linear, growth-oriented development thinking and ignorance of ecological constraints. From the 1970s onwards, however, a number of more comprehensive counterpoint development alternatives began to emerge, often building further on the critical analysis of the Dependency school. These are, not surprisingly, harder to label and categorise as by their very nature they refute the mainstream ideas of universality and desirability of single ‘development blueprints’. From these viewpoints, ‘Development’, if the term is to be used at all, must be radically reconceptualised and made distinct for each particular society and context. Pluralism and diversity are core values.

#### **Box: Another Development**

One early and influential attempt to formulate a counterpoint perspective on development was the 1975 report *What Now – Another Development*, stemming from a collaborative effort involving more than one hundred scholar-activists from both the north and the south who came together under the International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA) and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

In *What Now*, the concept of ‘another development’ was elaborated, and summarised according to five core principles:

- *Need-oriented*, geared to meeting human needs, both material and nonmaterial.
- *Endogenous*, stemming from the heart of each society which defines its own values and the vision of its future.
- *Self-reliant*, where each society relies primarily on its own strength and resources in terms of its members’ energies and its natural and cultural environment.
- *Ecologically sound*, utilising rationally the resources of the biosphere in full awareness of the potential of local ecosystems as well as the global and local outer limits imposed on present and future generations.
- Based on *structural transformation*, so as to realise the conditions of self-management and participation in decision-making by all those affected by it, from the rural or urban community to the world as a whole, without which the goals above could not be achieved.

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<sup>5</sup> What Now: Another Development. *Development Dialogue* 1975:1.

No one school of thinking thus dominates the alternative development discourse. Over the years and decades there have been myriads of approaches with different emphases and departure points that largely share the core counterpoint characteristics outlined above. Some of these include anti-globalisation struggles, the many movements coming together under the ‘another world is possible’ slogan of the World Social Forums, ‘de-growth’ movements, transition towns, indigenous peoples’ assertion of their rights to flourish as cultures, and the concepts of ‘buen vivir’ (living well) and rights of Mother Earth, building on Andean indigenous cosmovisions.

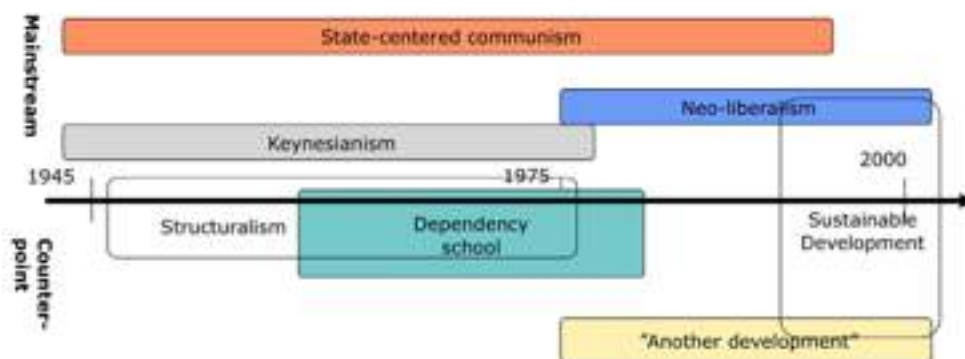
While differing in many ways, they all share the insights that current development trajectories are unjust and can not continue for ecological reasons, that economic growth and consumerism must be curbed or radically changed, that development thinking must always be rooted in a particular place with particular realities and can not be considered in some kind of abstract, universal sense, and that ecological realities set non-negotiable limits to what kind of ‘Development’ is possible.

To take these insights seriously means essentially all societies need to undergo deep structural transformation. For many this may sound ‘utopian’, politically unrealistic and far too radical. From these insights, however, the counter-argument is that the various mainstream development views are in fact the most utopian ones. All societies *will* change drastically – either because they collapse socially and ecologically from climate change and countless other development related problems, or because we choose to voluntarily transform our societies through radical action into more sustainable and just places before the full crisis hits.

### ***Sustainable development***

Lastly, sustainable development. Sustainable development was highlighted as a concept by the *The Brundtland Report (Our Common Future)* of the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and has since become one of the most important terms in UN forums, among governments and in civil society. But where does it belong? What views of development does sustainable development embody?

The answer is: everything. The only way to place it in the framework is to let it span the whole spectrum from mainstream to counterpoint (see figure). Sustainable development has become an amorphous, fluid concept, open for almost any kind of interpretation. Its success derives from the fact that everyone can be in favour of it and interpret it as compatible with their own particular, deeper understanding of ‘Development’.



Thus, mainstream neo-liberal interpretations see sustainable development as an environmental dimension added to the current processes of globalisation and market liberalisation. In this way sustainable development motivates the introduction of market mechanisms such as trading in carbon and ecosystem services and promotion of green growth through largely the same commercial interests and structures that have dominated the fossil fuel economy. The rich ‘developed’ countries are still in the lead and role models for the rest of the world, now through their ‘green technology’. In this interpretation, sustainable development does not require structural transformation and radical solutions, but rather more of the same kind of development thinking that has shaped societies over the last centuries, albeit with a ‘greener’ slant.

A slightly more radical twist on sustainable development is a Keynesian mainstream development notion where governments need to take a more active role and promote green growth through substantial public investments in, for example, renewable energy and public transport, with visions of a new kind of green welfare state.

At the other end of the spectrum, sustainable development is seen as a radical, revolutionary concept that challenges most of our conceptions of societies and ‘Development’. To ensure true sustainability, energy and material flows must be kept to a minimum, present consumption, trade, globalisation and the power of corporations must be fundamentally challenged and transformed. Ideals that value community, reciprocity, rights of nature and local place-bound connectedness must trump short-sighted, individual consumption and profit maximisation. This interpretation of sustainable development obviously overlaps to a considerable degree with the ideas of alternative/another development just discussed.

Thus, when, as is usually the case, people talk about sustainable development without declaring explicitly *what kind* of sustainable development they refer to, they may seem to agree on the surface while in fact they fundamentally disagree and are in conflict. Not infrequently a far from trivial slip of words can even be noticed, where for example ‘sustained economic growth’ becomes used interchangeably with ‘sustainable development’ – an oxymoron and likely outrageous notion for the counterpoint understanding of the concept.

### **Concluding thoughts**

How problematic, then, is the term ‘Development’. How trapped are we in certain interpretations of the word? Should we scrap the term all together? Some argue that it is time to abandon the very use of ‘Development’ as a concept and term. As Gilbert Rist has commented, there is a constant confusion between the ‘ideal of development, which is supposed to bring well-being and happiness to all, and the “development” that actually takes place, the adverse effects that can be witnessed all over the world.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rist, G. 2006 ‘Before thinking about What Next: Prerequisites for alternatives’ in *What Next Volume I: Setting the Context*, 8.

The term development is so deeply associated with the mainstream belief system that it traps us all. To stick with the term and simply try to modify it into sustainable development, alternative development, post-development, human-scale development, or development with a human face, won't do much in the end. They still imply many of the core tenets such as linearity, steady progress, growth obsession – or otherwise are contradictions in terms. If 'alternative development' really is a counterpoint to 'mainstream development', why confuse the issue by still clinging to the idea of 'Development' at all? The term is so deeply entrenched, some argue, it is a lost battle to ever believe in reclaiming or redirecting it.

Yet, the lack of an adequate and established alternative terminology in a sense proves the point – 'Development' keeps us in a firm grip. We need better terms both to explain what is actually taking place, what the implicit normative mainstream understanding of 'Development' is, as well as what counterpoint, alternative notions of ways towards better societies are all about. We also seem embarrassingly starved of suitable terminology for how to label different groups of countries. In both UN terminology and in civil society the terms 'developing' and 'developed' countries are still widely used. This only shows how embedded and internalised mainstream notions of development are.

Does any country really exist that has 'completed' its evolution and is now 'developed'? Aren't all countries 'developing', although in very different ways? Should we not rather call 'developed' countries 'over'- or 'mal'-developed countries if we are to use the term at all? And how does this widespread use of the term subconsciously and implicitly reinforce mainstream development thinking?

Far too often the different uses of the term are mixed in a confusing way. Take the current climate change negotiations as an example. Developing countries argue, rightly so, for their 'right to development' which is clearly enshrined in the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change*. The rapidly shrinking 'carbon budget' must be shared in a fair way, where the rich countries who have historically polluted beyond their means to drive their cheap fossil fuel-based 'Development' must now pay back and drastically cut down on their emissions to provide atmospheric space for the poorer countries to 'develop'. At the level of international negotiations this kind of argument all makes sense, with civil society generally standing behind the 'developing' countries' demands for their fair share and development rights.

But in what ways do the different actors' understanding of these 'Development' rights differ? Do they mean a right to replicate the western development trajectory with an implicit idea of linear catching-up development at its core? Is it the ideal of consumption-driven, growth-oriented trickle-down development driven by commercial and entrepreneurial domestic elites? Is it the conviction that new technology will make possible a movement through stages of development without serious ecological constraints?

Or – does the struggle for the right to development mean the right for climate justice and the emissions space needed to embark on a drastically *different* 'Development' trajectory that is *not* a replication of the western model, but rather breaking completely new ground. A transformation to more just and ecologically sustainable societies that challenges the mainstream development views of domestic developing country elites as much as it challenges the geo-political agendas of rich countries?

And what are the implications on the ‘over’- or ‘mal-developed’ rich countries in the global north? In what ways do they need to dismantle, transform, change their societies to become truly sustainable and repay their climate debt to the south? What ‘Development’ implications do a close to 100% reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over just a few decades imply?

This is where the heart of the debate is. These are the kinds of concrete deliberations and debates that must be clarified. To use the term ‘Development’ as if it had universal, common meaning is dangerous and even irresponsible. And we must realise we may be trapped in a balloon and dare to puncture it to see what’s outside.

What kind of development are we really talking about?

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Niclas Hällström leads the What Next Forum, a think-tank that convenes, explores and catalyses action on environment and alternative development thinking ([www.whatnext.org](http://www.whatnext.org)).