

Enquiry: Notions of Development

Who is 'us' and who is 'them' in the perspectives below? How is 'development' defined? What are the assumptions informing these perspectives? What are the implications of those assumptions?

We need to learn from them. If they are developed and rich it means that they can teach us. Of course not everyone in this country will be able to catch up, at the end of the day, most people here are uncultured and uneducated. But the best ones can be just like them, if properly taught.

When we say a country is 'underdeveloped' we are implying that it is backward and retarded in some way, that its people have shown little capacity to achieve and evolve. The use of the word 'developing' is less insulting, but still misleading. It still implies that poverty was an original historic condition based on the 'lack' of attributes of its people (in relation to characteristics 'we' have) – a mindset that was dominant in colonial times."

Any action that gives people more control over their own affairs is action for development, even if it does not give them better health or more bread. To us, development means the promotion of our independence and human dignity.

Developed countries are rich because they have exploited us for a long time. First, by colonising us, then with unfair trade rules, debt interests and sweatshops. If we were given a fair chance, we could be even richer than they are.

Developing countries are poor because they lack technology and education. Their systems of governance are not as evolved as ours. We need to help by teaching them. We can give them technology, proper work habits and good education.

They come here and impose their education, their technology and their way of seeing the world. This makes people more competitive and individualistic and breaks our communities. We do not need what they are trying to sell. We need a better distribution of resources and political power so that we can define how we want to live our lives.

They should not come here and think we are going to learn overnight. We are at least 50 years behind. We need much more time to become what they are now. But we do have the potential!

Informed Thinking

What informed your current perspective on this topic? What shapes the mainstream perspectives available to the public? Where can you find out about different perspectives? How do you make your decisions about what you think about it?

Reflective Questions

Take three minutes in silence to reflect about the following:

1. Do you think your country is 'developed'? What are your parameters for evaluating development? Where do those parameters come from?
2. What are the parameters for development (or achievement and merit) within your community (please define community in any way you want)?
3. How does your community see itself in relation to other communities? How do you think other communities see your community and why?
4. How do you think you contribute (or not) for the development of your country or community? Who has established the criteria of this contribution? Are there any groups that would have more difficulties of meeting these criteria?

Group Dialogue Questions

Read through the list of questions below. Are there any other burning questions you would like to add to this list? Select two 'priority' questions for discussion in your group.

1. What are the mainstream definitions of development/underdevelopment? What are the assumptions about the causes of development and underdevelopment according to those definitions? What are the implications of these assumptions?
2. Should all countries be aiming for one (universal) ideal of development? Who should define this ideal? What would be the implications of going in this direction?
3. What do people in societies that are considered to be part of the 'First World' have in common with those of the 'Third World'? Do you know the origins of these terms?
4. What are the connections of the mainstream understandings of development to the processes of colonisation?

5. What are the consequences of economic growth defined as accumulation of wealth? What are the consequences of undergrowth?
6. How do people/companies/governments generate wealth? Is it only a result of hard work and sacrifice? Does it involve the enforced disempowerment of other competitors or workers? How is poverty created?
7. How does the development of one country/community affect the development or underdevelopment of other communities?
8. How do the labels developed/underdeveloped affect social relations?

Responsible Choices

How does this topic relate to your context of work? To what extent does asking these questions affect your decisions?

Consider the following scenario: You are working with a group of young people who want to make a difference in the world. They believe that underprivileged people are poor because they lack education, so the group has identified a slum in Ethiopia and are fundraising for a trip to enable them to spend some time in the country educating the people in that community. You have been asked to organize a 2-hour workshop to help them reflect about their assumptions, aims and objectives. You do not want them to lose their motivation to act and think independently, but you want them to act in an informed, responsible and ethical way. What would your workshop outline look like?

Debriefing

Think about your learning process today. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others? What have you learned about knowledge and about learning? Do you feel you and other participants could express themselves in an open and safe space? What could be done to improve the learning process of the group and the relationships within the space?