

EXCERPTED FROM

Debating
Global
Development

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1

Global Poverty and the Challenges of Development

OUR WORLD IS FULL OF LIFE-THREATENING CHALLENGES: WAR, CLIMATE change, repressive governments, the spread of pandemic diseases, and more. Amid all of these, no global crisis creates as much human suffering and death as **extreme poverty**,* or people's inability to fulfill their basic material needs. For example, roughly half a million people die each year from all forms of conflict and violence, but at least ten times that number die from causes directly related to extreme poverty.¹ People in extreme poverty mostly die from diseases that are easily treatable or eradicated in the **Global North** (i.e., high-income countries), such as childhood malnutrition, diarrhea, respiratory diseases, HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria. People in extreme poverty also face various forms of daily suffering, from the inability to acquire a decent education, to increased vulnerability due to natural disasters, to discrimination based on race, gender, religion, or ethnicity.² Indeed, poverty is a factor that exacerbates many other global crises, making violent conflict, human rights abuses, the spread of diseases, and environmental degradation both more likely and more destructive. As such, it is vital that we collectively address the causes of extreme poverty and explore its solutions, which is the purpose of this book.[†]

Depending on how it is measured (see Chapter 2), between 700 million and 1.3 billion people live in extreme poverty today. This represents roughly one out of every ten people on earth living on the equivalent of less

* Terms in boldface are defined in the Glossary, which begins on page 245.

† Whenever you see a dagger in the text, go to page 241 and scan the QR code to pull up a webpage that links to an interactive online feature that accompanies the passage. In this first instance, see “Our World in Data” under Chapter 1 on the webpage and explore the charts on poverty.

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than \$2.15 USD per day.³ The majority of people in extreme (or absolute) poverty can be found in rural areas of **low-income countries** (or LICs, also known as the **Global South** or developing countries), mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.⁴ Approximately two-thirds of the extremely poor are children and youth. In general, marginalized groups of people are more likely to live in extreme poverty, such as people with disabilities or the elderly. For the same reason, women and girls make up the majority of those experiencing extreme poverty. This is due to global gender inequality, which prevents women from accessing education, health, decent work, and political power.⁵

What is it like to live this way?† It means lacking basic necessities like a roof that keeps out the rain, a sanitary toilet, a regular source of electricity, or a consistent source of cooking fuel. It means being frequently sick and unable to work, or chronically malnourished and unable to concentrate. It means being unable to access a quality education because you can't afford the school fees, or the school lacks teachers or supplies. It means being perpetually in debt, lacking property and capital that would help improve your income. It means being vulnerable to economic or environmental disasters because you lack insurance that would protect you in a crisis. It often means living under a repressive government that doesn't recognize your basic rights or living in a country consumed by civil war.

An additional one to three billion people live at a level just above extreme poverty. They can meet most of their daily needs but cannot afford most of the material goods that people in the Global North take for granted. Those living in **moderate poverty** earn an income equivalent to around \$3.20–\$5.50 per day and typically make their living in agriculture or in low-wage manufacturing and service industries.⁶ Although they do not suffer many of the hardships of extreme poverty, they barely make ends meet and are vulnerable to falling into a crisis or emergency. Many middle-income countries in Latin America and Asia have large numbers of people in moderate poverty.

Beyond extreme and moderate poverty, it is also important to understand the nature of **relative poverty**, which measures poverty as a comparison to the living standards of the rest of the people living within a particular country. The relative poverty line varies across time and between societies. For example, throughout the European Union the poverty line is set at 60 percent of the national median income (which amounts to roughly \$40 per day).⁷ Based on these criteria, approximately 100 million people

† Go to “Dollar Street” to see what it's like to live at different income levels. Click on one of the families to see photos of their home and their belongings. What's similar to how your family lives, and what's different?

are living in relative poverty in the European Union.⁸ It is clear that someone living on \$40 per day does not experience the same level of material deprivation as someone living on \$2 per day. Nevertheless, people living in relative poverty still experience the material needs, social exclusion, and political powerlessness that arise from economic inequality. Many people living just above their nation's poverty line do not qualify for public welfare and other forms of social support.

In sum, global poverty in all its forms remains one of the preeminent crises of the twenty-first century. It creates daily misery and suffering for a large portion of our global population. It both causes and is exacerbated by the economic, social, political, and environmental problems that impact all of us on this planet.

Myths of Global Poverty

While global poverty is a vital threat to human flourishing, it is also an issue that is widely and deeply misunderstood. For example, people often argue that we don't have to take poverty too seriously because of sayings like "money doesn't buy happiness." They argue that poor people are happy. Not only does this statement ignore the objective threats that poverty creates, but decades of global polling data show that this statement is quantifiably false. People in extreme poverty report deep dissatisfaction with their lives and their material circumstances, much more than people at higher income levels.⁹ In general, as people's material conditions improve, there is a significant gain in life satisfaction and subjective well-being, especially for those at the very bottom of the income scale.[†] This is not to say that people in extreme poverty lead invariably miserable lives; indeed, they may have some cultural advantages, social supports, and capabilities that are lacking in the wealthiest societies. However, it is incorrect to think that they are satisfied with their circumstances.

Another widespread myth is that poverty is steadily getting worse across the globe. Polling data in a range of wealthy countries shows that roughly 80 percent of people believe that poverty has gotten worse in recent decades.¹⁰ In fact, the exact opposite is true. Not only has global poverty receded across the world, but in the past few decades, we have witnessed the greatest improvements in poverty in human history! In the mid-1960s, half of the world's population earned incomes of less than \$2 per

[†] See "Gap Minder Graphs" to learn more about the correlation between income and life expectancy throughout time. Change the vertical axis by clicking on the label and selecting another indicator to see how income and other outcomes like education, population growth, and child mortality are related.

day (adjusted for inflation). Today, the proportion living in extreme poverty has been cut to under 10 percent, meaning that over a billion people were pulled out of poverty in the past two generations.¹¹ Much of the growth in incomes is attributable to the economic success of China and the **newly industrialized countries** (or NICs), which is the subject of Chapter 6. However, the world has seen improvements not just in the NICs, but across a wide range of indicators in all geographic regions. For example, hunger and childhood malnutrition have declined dramatically in all regions, not just due to economic growth, but also because governments and private organizations have focused specific attention to these problems.¹² Life expectancy is on the rise across all regions, as the deadliest diseases have been eradicated, prevented, or managed by increasing people's access to treatment. Access to primary education has expanded, especially for girls. When viewed across several decades, most LICs have also experienced democratization and a reduction in violent conflict.

If all these trends are improving, why do so many people believe that the opposite is true? We tend to view the world through our own cognitive biases, which are distorted ways of perceiving reality. One of these is the negativity bias.¹³ We tend to pay more attention to singular negative events than to long-term positive trends because bad news is often more dramatic than good news. It is easier for us to focus on a single famine or war than it is to comprehend that a billion people, who are often scattered geographically and invisible to the media, have gradually improved their livelihoods every day.

Another myth about global poverty is the assumption that current trends will continue in a linear direction. In truth, the future is always more unpredictable than we tend to believe. There is nothing inevitable about continued progress in reducing poverty, and in fact, some current trends may threaten the progress that has already been made. One of these threats is the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of other communicable diseases. Experts estimate that the global economic slowdown caused by Covid-19 condemned 100 million more people to extreme poverty in 2020 and is likely to push an additional 50 million into extreme poverty during the coming decade.¹⁴ The recent economic crisis has been worsened by the war in Ukraine and shortages in the global supply chain, which have made basic necessities like food and fuel more expensive throughout the Global South. In addition, it is predicted that climate change will drive up to 120 million more people into poverty by 2030 as it worsens tropical diseases, stunts agricultural productivity, and intensifies natural disasters in the most vulnerable regions of the Global South.¹⁵ As such, a realistic view of global poverty would require us to celebrate the progress that has been made so far, but simultaneously remain vigilant about the ongoing seriousness of the threats that remain.

A final cognitive bias that people in the Global North have about poverty is the egocentric bias, which overvalues a person's own experi-

ences and perspectives. People often ask, “Why should we care about poverty halfway across the world when we have so many problems at home?” However, this belief exemplifies a failure to distinguish between extreme poverty and relative poverty. Challenges in the Global North can be deadly serious, but they simply do not match the scale and urgency of extreme global poverty. People may also argue that wealthy countries have already given so much aid to help LICs develop, so it’s useless to try to do more. But as Chapter 8 discusses, citizens of wealthy nations dramatically overestimate both the amount and the beneficence of the aid that they provide to the Global South.

Defining Development

If global poverty is a critical problem, then “development” seems to be the obvious solution. But what do we mean by development, and how do we achieve it? These questions open up a wide range of controversial debates, which are the subject of this book.

Scholars and policymakers define development in vastly different ways, leading to differences in how nations set their goals, implement policies, and achieve development outcomes. Although virtually all definitions of development involve some attempt to improve the human condition, scholars have identified over twenty distinct definitions that imply different societal values and priorities.¹⁶ Most early definitions were primarily economic, framing development as a process of accumulating greater material resources.¹⁷ Following the Cold War, **modernization theory** became dominant in the Global North, an approach that conceptualized development as a process whereby the LICs would eventually take on the characteristics that the “developed” countries had already achieved. The Global North became the model that the rest of the world should follow. If LICs adopted a capitalist economy, allowing for private ownership, the free trade of goods and services, and minimal government interference, they too would experience economic growth.¹⁸ By promulgating this approach, the Global North hoped to expand its sphere of influence and subvert the spread of communism.

According to modernization theory, a developed society was one that had transformed its economy to complete prescribed stages of economic growth, moving from a reliance on agriculture to the mass production of high-tech goods and services.¹⁹ For modernization theorists, development became synonymous with “growth” in material wealth, though they argued that certain social, cultural, and political changes tend to accompany this economic transformation. Sociologists claimed that modern societies would inevitably exhibit greater social mobility, rule of law, and division of labor as they achieved economic growth. Anthropologists described how modern societies would adopt certain cultural ideas such as egalitarianism, universalism, and

the value of meritocracy. Political scientists argued that modern societies would also embrace democracy, protect human rights, and create stable governments.²⁰ Modernization theorists assumed that development was a linear process, directed toward a singular goal of achieving the capitalist successes of the Global North. Indeed, today many global development scholars continue to use “development” and “economic growth” interchangeably.

Over time, noneconomic definitions have gained greater prominence in the field of global development, particularly definitions related to social, political, and environmental concerns. In the area of social development, scholars have noted that economic growth is not always sufficient to guarantee basic human needs such as health, education, and a decent quality of life. Neither does economic growth ensure that a society will protect civil and political rights or establish democratic institutions. Amartya Sen expressed many of these concerns by defining development as a process of expanding freedoms rather than simply expanding income or wealth.²¹ According to Sen, freedoms are “capabilities of persons to lead the kind of lives they value,” and include the attainment of basic needs, the protection of civil and political rights, the availability of social opportunities, and the stability of public institutions.²² Each of these capabilities is not only instrumentally useful in increasing material wealth, but is also inherently valuable to any developed society. Economic growth might generate these capabilities, but it does not necessarily do so.²³ These freedoms are also not the exclusive property of the Global North.

Similarly, global development scholars have increasingly expressed their concerns about the possible mismatches between economic growth and environmental sustainability. Herman Daly described the differences between quantitative “growth” and qualitative “development”: “The two processes are distinct—sometimes linked, sometimes not. For example, a child grows and develops simultaneously; a snowball or a cancer grows without developing; the planet Earth develops without growing. Economies frequently grow and develop at the same time but can do either separately.”²⁴ As Daly and others highlighted the negative effects that economic growth could have on the environment, it led to the broad adoption of the goal of “sustainable development,” defined by the Brundtland Commission as the process of “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”²⁵

These definitions of development provide different answers to critical questions: How important is economic growth and material wealth, compared with social equality, the provision of basic needs, and the protection of political rights? Has a society developed if it has achieved wealth at the cost of future generations living on the planet? When development is defined in purely economic terms, it is subject to what William Easterly calls the “technocratic illusion,” or the belief that the development process is reducible to

the uncontroversial task of generating growth efficiently.²⁶ The more development is defined in noneconomic terms, the more it acknowledges that development is a politically and culturally contentious activity, subject to competing interests and values that may result in both winners and losers.

Is “Development” Even a Good Thing?

Driven by the assumptions of modernization theory, leaders in the Global North have historically promoted (or coercively imposed) policies within the Global South that were ostensibly designed to “modernize” those societies. For centuries, colonialism, forced religious conversion, and slavery were justified as efforts to civilize “backwards” societies. Colonizers touted their building of physical infrastructure, educational systems, and governmental bureaucracies as advancing development, but often it benefited only those who exploited the resources of the Global South to industrialize their own economies. Even after most colonized states gained independence, the policies promoted by the Global North, such as the Washington Consensus and military intervention, have arguably served the self-interests of the wealthy rather than the poor (see Chapters 7 and 10).

As a result, many development experts, especially within the Global South, have questioned the assumptions of modernization theory. If the “development” wrought by the Global North has largely resulted in exploitation and inequality, why should the LICs seek to follow their model? If industrialization and mass consumption have created environmental degradation, is the never-ending increase in material wealth an appropriate goal for everyone? Aren’t there key cultural values and sociopolitical institutions in so-called traditional societies that are more important to their people than transforming their societies through modernization?

Many of these critiques coalesced in the 1960s through institutions like the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and came to be known as **dependency theory**, an alternative approach that sought to reform preexisting conceptions of development. Dependency theorists argue that the Global South has been *underdeveloped* rather than undeveloped. In other words, the poverty of the Global South is the result of their captivity in an unfair and exploitative relationship with the Global North that has been mislabeled as “development,” and not the result of their failure to follow the Global North’s development model. According to dependency theorists, European colonialism was the first step in tying the world together into a single exploitative system, but the same kinds of underdevelopment occur today through unfair global economic rules and practices that disadvantage the Global South and prevent their true development (this world system is called “neocolonialism”).

Thus, many of the debates discussed in this book revolve around the competing assumptions underlying the two key approaches to development: modernization and dependency theory (see, for example, Figure 1.1 on the African Renaissance). Everyone wants development if it broadly means the improvement of the human condition. However, while modernization theorists view the goal of development to be the creation of capitalist, individualistic, democratic, mass-consumption societies, dependency theorists criticize this as a one-size-fits-all model that is not appropriate for everyone.²⁷ While modernization theorists attribute poverty to the failings of an LIC's own state or society, dependency theorists blame an unjust global system that creates inequality and underdevelopment. While modernization theorists perceive the Global North as mostly beneficial in promoting development in the Global South, dependency theorists are skeptical of the role of outsiders who pursue their own self-interests, don't understand local conditions, or act with paternalistic assumptions when they try to provide aid.²⁸ While modernization theorists praise globalization and economic integration, dependency theorists argue that economic integration should only be on terms that are more favorable to the Global South's economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental needs.

Figure 1.1 The African Renaissance: Debating Development in Africa

It is well known that the greatest concentration of people in extreme poverty live in sub-Saharan Africa²⁹ and that Africa has not experienced the same dramatic economic growth that some other regions of the world have achieved. Indeed, the 1980s and 1990s were known as Africa's "lost decades," as many African nations suffered developmental setbacks. However, in 1996, the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, predicted an "African Renaissance," popularizing the notion that Africa was primed for an economic and political resurgence.³⁰ Indeed, since Mbeki's declaration,

Africa has achieved significant development gains, averaging almost 5 percent growth per year in **gross domestic product** across the region.³¹ Economic growth has been accompanied by increased life expectancy, educational outcomes, and political stability across the continent.³²

What is this resurgence attributable to, and what is the path forward? For some, the African Renaissance is the result of the processes of modernization and globalization.³³ Although most scholars remain skept-

(continued)

tical of free-market capitalism, some argue that Africa has advanced by adopting global democratic norms and taking advantage of global economic integration. The continent has reduced its debt burden, attracted new foreign investment, and expanded tourism and other forms of high-value trade. These scholars argue that the path forward lies in continuing to integrate Africa into the global economic system, even as these countries attempt to reform the unjust rules of that system. They claim that African nations can use foreign aid from the Global North to promote broad-based poverty reduction.

For others, the African Renaissance must be based on self-reliance, a return to indigenous values and practices, and a disengagement from the neocolonial economic system.³⁴ Dependency theorists argue that global economic integration has largely continued the injustices of colonialism in Africa, by extracting natural resources, exploiting local workers, and dismantling systems of effective governance. They argue that African development should

uphold the values of community over individualism, and that it may require institutions that do not mirror capitalist democracies. These scholars tend to distrust the role of outsiders in development processes, particularly people from the Global North who are not as altruistic or knowledgeable as they claim to be.³⁵ Indeed, even the rhetoric of global development often contains racist undertones, as Africans are presumed to be inferior, hopelessly corrupt, incapable of directing their own development, and needing to be rescued by “white saviors.”³⁶ From this view, the African Renaissance should rely primarily upon regional (or South-South) integration, rather than integration with the Global North.

Thus, even those who acknowledge and support an African Renaissance disagree about what its goals should be and how it can best be attained.³⁷ This contest of ideas is vital because it will determine what policies will guide development practices for the next generation.

Outline of the Book

In this book, we discuss many of the most important questions in the field of global development, framed as a series of debates between competing perspectives. While some questions generate binary debates with two mutually exclusive arguments, others are best answered with multiple arguments that overlap with one another. There are no easy answers in global development, so we attempt to make the best arguments that represent each perspective, and we encourage you, the reader, to form your own opinions

about these debates. As you examine these issues, we hope that you will reflect upon the biases, myths, values, and assumptions that might influence your perceptions. Do you assume that folks living in poverty are just lazy and incapable, or that all governments in the Global South are hopelessly corrupt, or that the wealthy are fundamentally altruistic? Whatever your initial assumptions, we hope that they will be challenged by the debates in this book, and that you will be open to hearing various perspectives.

The first part of the book examines the broader philosophical, historical, and empirical questions in global development. Although most of the chapters of this book do not need to be read in any particular order, it would be helpful to read this section first. The definitions, measurements, and theories of development we discuss here will be repeated throughout the rest of the book and will give the reader a framework for analyzing the different debates. In Part One, we ask the following questions: How do different ways of defining development translate into different methods of measuring it, and into national strategies and policies for achieving it? How should economic growth be balanced against other developmental goals, such as the equitable distribution of wealth, political stability, human rights, or environmental sustainability? Historically, how did the world become so unequal, and who or what is to blame for extreme wealth and poverty? If extreme poverty creates so many disadvantages for individuals and societies, is it realistic to assume that the Global South can surmount those barriers without outside intervention? And what does the Global North owe to the Global South, if anything? Is it beneficial for outsiders to be involved in development at all?

Part Two focuses primarily on the role of the state in development. How much can national governments direct their own development, or are they mostly subject to global trends and forces? What kinds of policies generate economic growth and other positive development outcomes? How did China and the NICs pull so many people out of poverty in the past few decades, and can other countries replicate their success? Should the state take an active role in regulating its economy, or should development mostly be left in the hands of private corporations and entrepreneurs? Finally, what foreign policies are beneficial to promoting economic development in the Global South or dealing with threats like climate change and violent conflict?

Part Three explores the role of the private sector—multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social enterprises, and private individuals—in promoting or inhibiting development. For example, when large agricultural and pharmaceutical companies play a central role in the global production of food and medicines, does it increase or restrict everyone's access to these basic needs? What guiding principles and strategies can NGOs use to be most effective working in local communities? Can social entrepreneurship (i.e., using profitable business strategies to achieve

social goals) and global tourism provide an effective solution to poverty? Finally, in Part Four, we address perhaps the most critical question, what can you do to help end extreme poverty?

Each of these questions will be explored by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of different theories of development. Understanding these theories is not just an academic exercise; it is vital for understanding, justifying, and challenging the rules and practices in development that we see in the world today. If you believe, like we do, that extreme poverty is one of the most critical challenges of the twenty-first century, and that some of these rules and practices should change, we hope that you will find these discussions useful.

Notes

1. Ritchie and Roser, "Causes of Death."
2. See, for example, Sachs, *End of Poverty*, p. 18; Naraya et al., *Voices of the Poor*; Smith, *Ending Global Poverty*, p. 9–18.
3. World Bank, "Fact Sheet." Unless otherwise noted, all income figures reported are adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), making them comparable across different national settings. In addition, when using the \$ symbol, we refer to the US dollar (USD).
4. Note that different scholars and institutions divide the world into different categories, and each set of categories is a necessary oversimplification. The binary categories of Global North vs. Global South, or developed vs. developing countries are useful, but institutions like the World Bank and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also break countries down into the following four groups: high, upper-middle, lower-middle, and low income. Throughout the book, we use the terms "Global South" and "low-income countries (LICs)" rather than the popular term "less-developed countries" because we find these terms to be more value-neutral. We also typically avoid using "the poor" as a noun because we seek to avoid stigmatizing people living in poverty, as their lack of income does not define their existence.
5. Azcona and Bhatt, "Poverty is Not Gender-Neutral."
6. World Bank, "Fact Sheet."
7. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, "Poverty Guidelines."
8. Eurostat, "Living Conditions in Europe."
9. Sacks, Stevenson, and Wolfers, "The New Stylized Facts," p. 1181.
10. Rosling, Rosling, and Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness*, pp. 49–64.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
12. Global Hunger Index, "Global, Regional, and National Trends"; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, "Malnutrition in Children"; United Nations, *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021*, pp. 26–34.
13. Rosling, Rosling, and Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness*, pp. 65–74.
14. Kharas and Dooley, "Long-Run Impacts of COVID-19."
15. Hallegatte et al., *Shock Waves*, p. 14.
16. Wiarda, *Political Development in Emerging Nations*, p. 45.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*; Sachs, *End of Poverty*, pp. 26–50.

19. Sachs, *End of Poverty*, pp. 33, 43; Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth*, pp. 4–16.
20. Sachs, *End of Poverty*, p. 45; Reyes, “Four Main Theories of Development,” p. 2.
21. Sen, *Development as Freedom*.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
24. Daly, *Beyond Growth*, p. 110.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
26. Easterly, *Tyranny of Experts*, p. 6.
27. Goorha, “Modernization Theory,” pp. 3–6; Dietz, “Dependency Theory: A Review,” pp. 572–574.
28. See Easterly, *White Man’s Burden*.
29. Africa is a continent containing fifty-four states, each with distinct histories, cultures, policies, and economic systems. Because of some key regional differences, scholars typically categorize the nations of North Africa together with the Middle East rather than with sub-Saharan Africa. Unless otherwise noted, *Africa* will be used as shorthand for the region of sub-Saharan Africa.
30. Ajulu, “Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance,” p. 27.
31. Fosu, “Governance and Development in Africa,” p. 5. See discussion of gross domestic product in Chapter 2.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–14.
33. Ajulu, “Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance,” p. 29.
34. Matunhu, “Critique of Modernization and Dependency Theories,” p. 71.
35. Clements, “What Role Can Privileged White People Play?”; Chambers, *Rural Development*, p. 3.
36. Easterly, *White Man’s Burden*; Matunhu, “Critique of Modernization and Dependency Theories,” p. 69; Chambers, *Rural Development*, p. 140; Pierre, “Racial Vernaculars of Development,” p. 87.
37. Ajulu, “Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance,” p. 33.