Introduction

What Is Development, Why Should We Be Concerned About its History, and Why Is a New Serial Publication Needed?

This is the first volume of the newly established *Yearbook for the History of Global Development* – a serial publication we hope will became a key outlet in this field of research. In an academic world crammed with journals, conference proceedings, websites, and blogs, establishing a new serial publication requires some explanation. As editors, we believe that development is an important subject; that there is a tangible need for more knowledge about the history of development; and that a yearbook is the most appropriate format to publish research on this topic. In the following, we would like to explain why we believe that this is so and how we intend the *Yearbook* to contribute to the future of the field.

What Is Development?

To explain the significance of development may be the most difficult challenge. For a concept that has been as instrumental in shaping worldviews, socioeconomic policies, and the livelihoods of millions of people, the term “development” is remarkably ill-defined. A far from exhaustive overview reveals that existing efforts to arrive at a definition range from the particular to the all-encompassing, from full embrace to passionate rejection of the notion of development. Arguably the most fundamental disagreement among those thinking about the meaning of development is about whether development is an empowering and beneficial phenomenon, or, rather, a destructive and repressive tool.

Let us look at this dichotomy in some more detail.

Those who highlight the positive aspects of development, like Hugo Slim, insist that development is “essentially about change: not just any change, but a definite improvement – a change for the better.”1 Mohamed Rabie argues that development “involves the application of certain economic and technical measures to utilize available resources to instigate economic growth and improve people’s

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quality of life.”² Similarly, the Society for International Development declares its goal to be “a rise in the level and quality of life of the population, and the creation or expansion of local regional income and employment opportunities, without damaging the resources of the environment.”³ Amartya Sen has famously defined development as “freedom,” conceived as the capability of individuals to make decisions concerning their own lives, and according to their own values and desires.⁴ By contrast, scholars like Arturo Escobar have depicted development as a proto-colonial strategy by industrialized countries to control the Global South.⁵ Similarly, Gilbert Rist, while seeking to discredit the very notion of development as an absurd “buzzword,” has defined the “essence of development” as “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.”⁶

Interestingly, these contrasting evaluations cut across otherwise very different understandings of what development means. One of the most important disagreements is about whether development should be understood as synonymous with economic growth. Such a view became paradigmatic in many parts of the world in the mid-twentieth century. Although alternative understandings of development gained in strengths and numbers in the last third of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, the idea of development as economic growth is prevalent in many circles still today.⁷ Those who do not agree with this view argue that the equation is conceptually flawed. For example, Herman Daly in 1987 argued that “growth is quantitative increase in physical dimensions; development is qualitative improvement in non-physical characteristics. An economy can therefore develop without growing, just as the planet Earth has developed (evolved) without growing.”⁸ Taking a middle ground, Amartya Sen ar-

⁷ Society for International Development, “What is Development.”


This brings us back to the question what development is. In his discussion, Hugo Slim pays equal attention to what development is as to what it is not. He insists that development is a lot more than “a matter of economics and economic growth,” and that it is not only a “Third world problem but presents a goal for all societies.”¹³ This discrepancy of whether development is about North-South relations, characterized by asymmetric power relations, or about a challenge and desire shared by all people around the world, is also reflected in disagreements about when development became established as a policy field. Critics like Esteva argue that development started in 1949, “born in the context of the Cold War.”¹⁴ This view has come under attack in recent years, as scholars have highlighted the much longer, multicentered history of developmental interventions.

The variety of views derives not only from different opinions but also from the fact that some authors focus on what development should be while others describe the – inevitably much less impressive – existing forms of development, with all the flaws associated with real life. Some authors reflect on this difference in levels of analysis.¹⁵ Others do not. And still others do not even attempt to provide a definition. Nico Schrijver, author of a book on the supposedly positive effect of UN developmental activities, Development without Destruction, finds it “appropriate to briefly present a number of basic concepts and principles that will be regularly referred to and further elaborated in the following chapters” but sees no need to include “development” in this list of basic concepts.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Alexandra Brandl argues that there is no point in presenting a definition since, in her view, there is no such thing. Hence, she states, “those overlapping and diverging perceptions of what we mean with development ultimately lead to the understanding that the notion of development can only be interpreted from a certain standpoint rather than pinned down to one precise and at the same time comprehensive definition.”¹⁷ Ian Goldin and Kenneth Reinert seem to agree. In a volume called Globalization for Development, they point out that understandings have changed over time in “what is meant by ‘development’.”¹⁸ They also ob-

¹³ Slim, “What is Development?,” 143.
¹⁴ Esteva, “What is Development?”.
¹⁵ Slim, “What is Development?,” 143.
serve a “better appreciation than in the past of the roles of institutions, history, the public sector, and human welfare in development processes.” In their view, this understanding presents a “middle ground,” a degree of common understanding that nevertheless leaves “intellectual room for multiple, successful routes to development.”¹⁹

As these and similar statements suggest, development can mean a variety of things, depending on perspective and interests. It is this ambiguity that, in our view, makes it important to study the history of development. We believe that a historical account of what different actors have meant when they talked about development (or used one of its many synonyms) and how they translated their ideas into practice can help us understand how individuals and societies have perceived socio-economic challenges and how they have approached them. Thus, studying the history of development can provide insight into how societies perceived themselves, into their fears and worries, goals, and visions. Rather than focusing on a specific world region, we aim to encourage a genuinely global perspective that allows us to compare situations and phenomena, and to discover connections as well as ruptures.

Why History?

1 Visions of development have been the driving force behind much of human history

In an article that otherwise focuses on the social sciences, Immanuel Wallerstein argued that “A case can be made for the assertion that the concept of development is not merely one of the central components of the ideology both of western civilization and of world social science but is in fact the central organizing concept around which all else is hinged.”²⁰ Arguably, the hope to improve one’s lot has been the overriding motivation underlying virtually all human history, ever since early humans invented the wheel. And even if the claim of development as the basis for practically everything may go a little far, there can be no doubt that the idea of development, however conceived, has provided a powerful driver for decisions and action at the private, local, national, regional, international, and global levels for at least the last 70 years and probably much longer. Countless

¹⁹ Goldin and Reinert, Globalization, 41–42.
projects conducted in the interest of some idea of development have left their marks on the world as it exists today.

In many cases this is true in a literal sense, as development efforts have physically shaped the face of the Earth. For thousands of years, humans have transformed land, mainly through agriculture, and the scale and speed at which they have done so has increased substantially in the last centuries.\textsuperscript{21} The expansive canal systems of China and England (and elsewhere) were built to accommodate transportation needs at times of economic and demographic expansion; they had a decisive impact on the history of these countries – or, at least, of some of their regions – and still structure present-day landscapes.\textsuperscript{22} River rectification projects carried out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drastically changed trade possibilities, flood risks, housing, and landscape patterns.\textsuperscript{23}

The use of wood for construction and heating has led to the deforestation of some areas and to the planting of timber plantations in others.\textsuperscript{24} Other forests were eliminated in order to make room for different forms of land use. Between 1700 and 2018, the world lost roughly one third of its forest, mainly to agriculture, which now covers approximately half of all habitable land.\textsuperscript{25} Dams have created artificial lakes, drowned settlements, and displaced millions of people – while providing a large part of the world population with electricity for their socio-economic activities.\textsuperscript{26} Mining of mineral and other resources has been practiced for thousands of years but intensified after industrialization increased the need for metals and fossil fuels. In many places across the world, it has led to the removal of vegetation, changes in earth reliefs, pollution, increased erosion, and increased soil and rock instability. According to one observer, “[m]
ining and ore processing are amongst the most important impetus of human development and are regarded as the second worst global polluters today.\textsuperscript{27}

These extractive processes, which have drawn on nature as an allegedly infinite “resource,” have allowed a growing number of people to enjoy higher living standards and lives made comfortable through various consumer goods. But the way these processes played out has inevitably been shaped by unequal power relations. The destructive effects of extraction activities on the natural environment have disproportionately been borne by those without the possibility to protest or to be listened to. This has been most pronounced in (though not limited to) societies under authoritarian rule. For example, under Soviet auspices, intensive irrigation agriculture in Central Asia resulted in the near disappearance of what once was the fourth largest lake on Earth, the Aral Sea.\textsuperscript{28} In China, efforts to jump-start industrialization during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) left many mountainous regions deforested, especially in the Northwest of the country, where approximately one third of the forests are believed to have disappeared.\textsuperscript{29} Globally, colonial rule served as a driver of interventions into the natural environment. In the French colony of New Caledonia, the discovery of large reservoirs of oxidized nickel (used for constructing airplanes and to generate nuclear power) led to the movement of half a billion tons of rock to mine 100 million tons of ore between 1890 and 1990. The process involved the beheading of mountains, leaving some regions irreversibly changed.\textsuperscript{30} Investments in industrialization resulted in the widespread creation of monoculture plantations producing cotton and rubber.\textsuperscript{31} Collectively, these and many similar developments efforts have shaped today’s world in a profound sense. As people, governments, and corporations around the world have manipulated the natural world in pursuit of energy, raw materials, and labor, the physical landscapes around the world have come to bear witness of development visions. In a less visible but


\textsuperscript{30} McNeill, \textit{Something New under the Sun}, 31–32.

no less profound way, understandings of development have shaped past and current theories of how the world, past and present, functions.

2 The perceived history of development forms a core component of present world views and the policy decisions that are made in their name

Past developmental decisions have not only affected the state of the world in a direct way through the material manifestations of their results. They have also indirectly (though no less profoundly) influenced international relations by shaping the world views and theories that, in turn, have informed political and economic decisions. Arguably most major ideologies are based, at least in part, on theories formed from perceived developmental patterns. Marxism is firmly based on the belief in a pattern of stages through which all societies will develop as a historical rule. This concept, drawn from a combination of historical observations and predictions into the future, has served both to explain the world and to justify far-reaching political decisions, many of them geared at accelerating the expected pattern of development. It was in explicit response to this theory that Walt Rostow presented his theory of five stages of economic growth in 1960. He argued that societies could be made to jump developmental scales through a combination of financial, technical, and political support from abroad, and that sooner or later all countries would arrive at the supposedly highest stage, liberal capitalism. Collectively, these ideas about how socio-economic transformations would and should take place corresponded to and underwrote political worldviews, which competed with each other in the context of the Cold War. While the Cold War is over, political divisions remain in place, and competing ideas of capitalism, socialism, hybrid and alternative forms, together with their respective interpretations of the past and imaginaries of the future, continue to influence political decisions, alliances, and conflicts until today.

Such diverging interpretations of history and its role for the future have also shaped the various concepts of development that exist today. The usefulness of a historical perspective becomes evident when considering writing on the nature of development. In several publications Amartya Sen outlined his idea that fam-

ines do not occur in democracies.\textsuperscript{34} When critiquing Amartya Sen’s seminal 1999 book \textit{Development as Freedom}, Denis O. Hearn pointed out that this argument overlooks famines that were brought about by colonial rule, which Mike Davis depicted so powerfully in his \textit{Late Victorian Holocausts}.\textsuperscript{35} Admittedly, this perspective, in turn, overlooks the fact that late nineteenth century Britain can hardly be considered a genuine democracy with an open exchange of information and opinions. Similarly, Gilbert Rist’s assertion that development destroyed human relations because “[w]hat used to be freely exchanged within the family circle or among neighbours has been progressively converted into paid employment [...] expensive day nurseries have replaced grandparents in looking after small children” betrays a romantic vision of an unspecified past untouched by slavery, wet nurses, early death, and abandoned children, all of which were common during much of human history.\textsuperscript{36}

In short, in as much as any theory is a systematization of perceived historical patterns, all discussion of theory requires a critical historical analysis. Just as the analysis of Rostow’s modernization theory informs historical understandings of Western developmentism in the Cold War era, studying it as a response to Marx’s stages of capitalist development reveals the historical evolution of development theory. Similarly, more recent theoretical approaches in development, such as the basic needs concept have their roots in responses to perceived flaws in modernization theory. This evolution has a history of its own, and understanding this history is vital to the analysis of contemporary development theory.

\section*{3 Many of the central challenges of the future are developmental in nature}

Challenges deriving from developmental decisions and path dependencies of the past can involve potential threats to human life support systems. Climate change, the result of dramatic increases in fossil fuel use over the last decades, will doubtlessly affect generations of people and other living beings far into the future. Covid-19 has dramatically demonstrated the destructive power of pan-


\textsuperscript{36} Rist, “Development as a Buzzword,” 489.
demics, causing not only large numbers of deaths but also enormous economic damage and substantial social disruption. The emergence of pandemics is fuelled by rapid population growth, urbanization, the encroachment of human settlements into formerly remote natural environments, climate change, increasing global mobility, civil conflict, unequal access to education and healthcare, and the fast spread of information, disinformation, and rumors. Together, all of these factors contribute to making pandemic outbreaks more probable and dangerous than in the past.\(^{37}\)

Ignoring the histories of these processes comes at a cost. Historical analysis offers insight into contemporary developmental challenges that can assist in finding sustainable solutions. This ambition is not new. Already in 2009, Harvard economist Nathan Nunn ended a review of historically informed development literature with the conclusion that “history matters.”\(^{38}\) More recently, the editors of a volume on *International Development* made clear that they hope for their “work to be of practical and not solely of intellectual use.”\(^{39}\) Ultimately, it is difficult to conceive of any study addressing questions of development that does so without reference to past events, ideas, or policies. We believe that a dedicated yearbook on these topics can help to bring the different approaches and findings together in fruitful ways.

### Why a New Serial Publication?

The history of development is no longer an exotic topic in the historical profession. The growing establishment of the field is mirrored in the publication of a range of books and overviews in recent years.\(^{40}\) The increasing interest in develop-

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Development as a historical topic is also evident from the number of related international conferences. Although there is, at present, no association specifically dedicated to the history of development that would host conferences at regular intervals, this has not prevented scholars from organizing meetings in a variety of contexts.

That said, a serial publication dedicated to the history of development does not exist thus far. This is noteworthy since there are at least 40 journals dedicated to “development,” mostly addressing concepts and/or policies related to actual or desired changes in socio-economic conditions around the world, usually with a focus on the Global South. Clearly, there was — and still is — ample research space given to questions related to the intertwined challenges of improving living conditions in many parts of the world, of mitigating distributional imbalances, and of safeguarding environmental life support systems. Given that all present global developmental problems are rooted in their historical origins, this lack of historical perspective seems bewildering. The Yearbook for the History of Global Development (YHGD) seeks to fill this gap.

The Yearbook aims at providing a forum that emphasizes the interconnected nature of past and present development challenges and development approaches. The purpose of the Yearbook is to offer a space for the presentation of research on the history of concepts, theories, practices, and experiences concerning development policies in the past that continue to shape present-day attitudes and beliefs. In doing so, it aims at providing an academic home for scholars working on multiple dimensions of a field that is, at present, fragmented but at the same time united by an interest in the core question of how people, institutions, and agencies in the past have envisaged how societies should change and how they have acted on those ideas.

Thus, we hope that the YHGD will help overcome the fragmentation that is clearly detrimental to a deeper understanding of developmental thinking and actions. Colonial policies and development aid programs did not emerge independently of larger ideas regarding how industrialized countries — and, eventually, the world at large — would or should evolve. Similarly, present-day debates about sustainable development and (de-)growth are profoundly shaped by ideas about past and present North-South relations, among others. It is our hope that the Yearbook will serve as a forum for debate between different interpretations of development while also revealing connections and interactions that

would otherwise remain hidden. In the long term, the *Yearbook* aims at increasing the impact of the scholarly literature on the history of development around the world.

In addition to serving an academic discipline, one explicit aim of the *Yearbook* is to strengthen the voice of historians in larger societal debates about possible and adequate responses to twenty-first challenges. These challenges include environmental and economic issues but also questions of global inequality and of relations between industrialized (or post-industrial) countries (among them the former colonial powers), today’s low-income countries (almost all former colonies), and the growing group of countries of so-called emerging economies. The relations and conflicts between these countries and regions all have a past, and informed debates about future policies require a sound understanding of their historical bases. This, in turn, requires a comprehensive view on development as a multitude of intertwined past concepts and practices.

Within this general framework, the *Yearbook* aims at addressing the following topics in particular, but not exclusively:

- Actors of development, including national governments, international and regional organizations, social movements, individuals, non-governmental organizations, and others;
- Concepts of development, including modernization theory, capitalism, communism, basic needs, development as freedom, sustainable development, degrowth, post-development, etc., and the ways in which these concepts have changed through adaptation to evolving circumstances or new ideas, through hybridization and/or through selective adoption;
- Practices of development, including industrialization, agricultural improvement and intensification, the construction of infrastructure development assistance programs, grassroots efforts, etc.;
- The role of knowledge in development debates, including the role of different types of science and technology, and the transregional, transimperial, and transnational circulation and adaptation of different forms of knowledge;
- The underlying norms and values of developmental thinking, including perceived prosperity, justice, equality, freedom, democracy, happiness, or lack thereof, gender norms, languages, and ethnic and “racial” categories;
- Seeming winners and losers of developmental processes, unequal access to developmental resources and promises, unexpected or unintended side-effects of development projects, and the use of coercive and violent practices in the name of development as well as trade-offs between different, potentially contradictory effects on different groups, or the same groups at different times.
While the Yearbook’s key discipline is history, contributions from neighboring disciplines are also relevant. These include sociology, anthropology, area studies, political economy, cultural studies, public health, science and technology studies, and economics, among others. Within history, pertinent sub-disciplines include the history of science and technology, colonial, medical, diplomatic, economic, social, global, and cultural history.

As editors, we hope to attract a large number of readers from across the globe and from different backgrounds. By making all volumes available in open-access format, we try to overcome structural inequalities that continue to characterize international academic debate. We invite scholars interested in publishing their work in the Yearbook to contact us directly. Furthermore, we encourage colleagues to suggest edited volumes on a given theme in the history of development.

Outline of the First Volume

The first volume of the Yearbook consists of three parts: one on “Development and History”; one on “Measuring Development”; and a “Forum on Alternative Development Indices.” The rationale is to bring together pieces that reflect the current state of the art in the field, broadly understood, and to highlight some of the themes on which fresh research is currently being carried out.

The section on “Development and History” is dedicated to key questions concerning the history of development: What is development, what has it been in the past, and what can historians learn from studying the history of development? How has the field of the history of development evolved over time, and where should it be going in the future? We have asked a set of renowned experts on the history (or histories) of development to address these questions through the lenses of their respective specializations, from Asian, African, and Latin American history to the history of ideas to the history of religion to the history of colonialism and decolonization.

The section on “Measuring Development” speaks to the interest among historians in the ways in which the concept of development emerged and how it was turned into a quantifiable entity. The last ten years or so have seen a notable growth in the study of quantification and economic thinking. Our section builds on this work and goes beyond it by incorporating different time periods and different organizations and regions than those covered by existing literature. The articles in this section feature Soviet planners, Indian development experts, World Bank staff, and historians of development.
The forum on Alternative Development Indices gives voice to some of those actors who, as scholars and activists, were or are involved in thinking about ways of assessing development in terms other than economic growth. There has been a growing interest in the reactions to the perceived crisis of development that took the floor in the 1970s and 1980s and has stayed with us ever since. Concepts like the Human Development Index have become fully established and institutionalized, while other indices have remained outside the mainstream but have developed a momentum of their own, especially with the growing interest in post-development studies. We consider this forum both a historiographical contribution and as a way of bringing in the experiences of practitioners, and thus as an opportunity to encourage conversations across professional divides.

In closing, we would like to thank our colleagues who have supported our project of establishing this new yearbook in many ways. Rabea Rittgerodt from Oldenbourg De Gruyter took on the project and encouraged us to pursue it. She has been immensely supportive in finding solutions to questions from open access publishing to the more mundane tasks associated with a new serial publication, and we thank her wholeheartedly for all her work and her good humor along the way. Many of our colleagues agreed to serve on the Editorial Board of our yearbook and provided inspiration and suggestions. We thank them kindly for their commitment and their intellectual contributions. Furthermore, we would like to express our gratitude to Shanghai University for generous financial support. Bas Rensen took excellent care of many organizational tasks and helped us to meet the production deadlines; many thanks for that. Last but not least, we are tremendously grateful to all our colleagues who accepted our invitation to write articles for a yearbook they had never heard about, and who were willing to establish it by sharing their expertise and investing their time. And we thank our external reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions on the articles of the first volume, which, we hope, will inspire interesting conversations and help create new connections across the globe.