II Measuring Development
(ed. Corinna R. Unger and Jack Loveridge)
“Statistics must always have a purpose,” wrote the Indian planner Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis in 1965. For the man whose economic models informed India’s second Five Year Plan, the purpose was clear. Statistics were the “essential information required to prepare the plans of economic development.” They also served tools for “assessing the progress” of those plans, and experts could adjust their strategies based on new data that they collected. In other words, statistics were constitutive of the entire project of India’s development, just as they were for all other countries. Because of the centrality of measurement to global development aspirations, Mahalanobis foresaw an “increasing demand for statistics” long into the future to “bring in the new age of peace, prosperity, and progress of the world.”¹ Mahalanobis’ claims about the power of statistics contain valuable insights for the historian of international development. To study the measurement of development is to study development itself. After all, how can one understand development if it is not measured, quantified, and assessed?

Across the twentieth century world, experts debated how development should be measured. The dominant metrics were those associated with national income accounting, such as Gross National Product (GNP) and later Gross Domestic Product (GDP).² This was true for national economic policy and international development. For much of the twentieth century, national leaders and many experts equated economic growth measured by GNP as evidence of development. The German-British economist Hans Singer noted that a belief in the power of GNP growth as an economic cure-all “enabled economists to transfer familiar concepts and familiar modes of thinking to the relatively new but rapidly emerging problems of the Third World,” assuming a “trickle-down” effect would be a solvent for political and social strife.³ Yet there were many thinkers

² GDP is the value of the production within a country, and GNP is that value plus net property income from abroad. From the 1930s through the early 1990s, most countries used GNP. Since the 1990s, GDP has become far more common.
and activists who envisioned alternative ways of quantifying economic development. From heterodox scholars who attempted to create alternative metrics for developmental success – some of which still have some valence today, such as Mahbub ul Haq’s Human Development Index – to those that questioned the use of statistics at all, the measurement of development has long been a subject of political contestation.

In recent years, economic measurement has become a subject of historical inquiry. This innovative research follows from the theoretical and empirical work undertaken by political theorists, anthropologists, and historians to historicize the notion of “the national economy” as a social space and the related concept of quantitative “economic growth.” This field of research stemmed in part from Timothy Mitchell and Adam Tooze’s generative work that placed the rise of the economic growth paradigm in the 1930s and 1940s as a core element of the twentieth century. In countries as different as the United States, United Kingdom, Sudan, and Japan, policymakers embraced economic growth measured by GNP as central to national purpose.⁴ The Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union reinforced the centrality of aggregate economic metrics as proxies for developmental success. Both countries defined their goals for foreign aid and measured the viability of national economic strategies in aggregate

growth rates. Economic growth was a shared language, an object of governance, and a political expectation that transcended the ideological and temporal divisions that too often frame our narratives of the previous century. For these reasons, historians have described the embrace of GNP growth as a significant “ideology,” “imperative,” and “paradigm.” Altogether, these scholars argued that to understand twentieth century global history, one had to comprehend the origins and evolution of how experts and leaders measured development.

Scholars have also studied the politics of numbers. There has long been a focus on how political elites used statistics to make claims about how to use the resources of the state and justify various policy choices. Furthermore, scholars have now analyzed in great detail how economists became especially important figures in this process. Economists supplied influential frameworks and concepts that leaders and lay citizens alike used to make sense of the world. Economic statisticians worked in government to identify standards and practices for collecting data, creating models of national economic activity, and comparing national economies across time and space. As a result of their efforts, economic

6 Historian John McNeill, for instance, claims that economic growth was “easily the most important idea of the twentieth century.” J. R. McNeill, Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 336.
statistics such as GNP assumed a privileged role in public life through their use in national planning and through the ways in which they defined popular expectations of what governments can and should do.⁹

In addition to providing historical perspective on economic growth and statistics in policy-making, historians have also analyzed how international development emerged throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a fundamental aspect of global politics. Over the last couple of decades, historians have uncovered the intellectual and policy origins of development thought and practice, the material and ecological consequences of international development, and the ways in which development shaped major aspects of international life, from the end of colonialism to the global Cold War through the global War on Terror. This research has placed international development in its rightful role in the international history of the twentieth century world, and not just as another feature of US hegemony and foreign policy priorities. Indeed, some of the most important recent research has de-centered the United States and highlighted the role of non-state actors, social movements, and non-Western intellectuals and activists in shaping the trajectory of development.¹⁰

In this essay, I analyze this historiography by explicitly exploring the linkages and insights to be found by connecting the new histories’ economic growth, statistics, and international development. In particular, I focus on three major themes in the historiography of measuring development. First, I argue that scholars have placed the origins and diffusion of aggregate economic indicators (chiefly Gross National Product, or GNP) as a central theme in the history of in-

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ternational development. Second, I show how historians of development have used the history of GNP as a lens through which to analyze how development captured important themes of the twentieth century writ large, such as the economic dimensions of territoriality and the meaning and limits of nationhood. Finally, I illuminate how some historians have begun to investigate the history of criticisms of dominant forms of measurement and the flaws in so many historical statistics used in narratives about economic development. I rely on studies of economic measurement that have focused on Western European countries, the United States, and Japan, as well as the growing literature on international development experts and measurement in the Global South. For studies of the socialist world, see the essay by Artemy Kalinovsky in this volume.

The recent scholarship on measuring development has made fruitful connections between the history of economic thought, state formation, and nation-building. Prior to the twentieth century, of course, there had long been attempts by individuals to assess the quantity of national and imperial wealth. What changed during the twentieth century was the extent to which the national economy, defined as a measurable entity that most every capitalist country calculated in similar way, became the shared object of development for national governments and international organizations. The revolutions in national income accounting during the Great Depression and World War Two tied the statistical representation of the economy to the geographical territory of the nation-state. The global spread of national statistical agencies and the standardization of national income accounting reinforced the nationalization of economic statistics and the quantification of economic life.¹¹

The widespread use of GNP furnished a way of discussing national economic production and broader discussions of national well-being, too. Economists and statisticians used economic aggregates in historical narratives of national success and failure. In turn, political elites deployed these stories to describe overall national vitality. In popular discourse and policy circles, it was common to claim that countries that experienced high GNP growth had made the right economic choices and held a bright future, whereas those that faced low growth had chosen poorly and faced dimmer prospects. Measuring development became intertwined with international comparisons that depicted countries as monolithically rich or poor, growing or stagnating, or improving or declining.¹²

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Historians have done well to expose this way of thinking and criticize its implications. Yet more work is necessary on a couple of fronts. For one, we would benefit from further studies that focus less on the intellectual and political history of economic measurement and more on its social implications. In other words, we need more research to investigate how acts of measurement – by national elites, academic experts, local enumerators, and surveyors – shaped the daily experience of people around the world, the extent to which individuals incorporated numerical ways of depicting national life into their own self-perceptions, and how calculative practices reshaped both lives and landscapes in fundamentally material ways. Second, while historians have begun to examine the long history of criticisms of dominant forms of measurement, there is a need for additional inquiries in this vein. What alternative metrics did activists and reformers put forth to challenge GNP? To what extent did they fail? How have recent trends in subnational metrics – especially those created by social scientists for studying subnational developmental outcomes – challenged or reinforced popular measurement practices? More work on the history of alternative approaches would be valuable, to expand on the important foundational work historians have done to uncover the origins and evolution of the most common forms of economic measurement.

The History of Development as the History of GNP

Much of the historiography of measuring developed has focused on GNP. Historians have shown that the efforts to quantify the economic life of the colonial and post-colonial world derived from three interrelated crises. The first crisis was the global crisis of capitalism in the 1930s. The Great Depression exposed how little governments knew about the economic activity that took place in their borders, and it led many leaders to call upon new techniques of measurement to track, manage, and assess their recovery programs. Keynesian economics, which required aggregate economic statistics, took hold in Washington and London. Measuring national economies in terms of national income figures thus became common practice.¹³

The second crisis was the looming crisis facing the British Empire (and indeed, all other empires). The Depression exposed not only the inequalities wrought by capitalism in the metropole, but the brutal and squalid conditions throughout the empire. Imperial authorities turned to aid for development – promising increasing prosperity and improved living conditions – to re-legitimize imperial rule and forestall the possibilities of widespread unrest and radical demands for political change. British economists and statisticians had been especially influential in national income estimates and viewed them as important tools to manage colonial affairs.¹⁴

The third crisis was one of expert knowledge, particularly economic knowledge. Economists stood poised to exploit both these crises and position themselves in the vanguard of knowledge production. The Depression exposed how little governments actually knew; the late colonial turn towards development revealed a stark dearth of information (let alone knowledge) about the national income of the colonies. Many important economists and statisticians who constructed and advocated for national income estimates, such as British economists Richard Stone and Austin Robinson, worked in research institutes and international organizations that put them in close contact with colonial officials.¹⁵ As a result, there were acutely aware of the similar administrative and intellectual needs for greater information.


These three crises led Western development thinkers to embrace GNP as a tool in national economic governance and as a component in economic theory building. They did so just as GNP became a central component of national economic policy in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan. During the 1920s and 1930s, scholars incorporated advanced data collection methods and mathematical calculations to analyze putative economic phenomenon in what became known as econometrics. The growing interest in macroeconomic analysis during the Great Depression – inspired by the British economist John Maynard Keynes and his many acolytes – led many economists to incorporate econometric analysis into national policy. These experts produced detailed statistical depictions of national economic activity that policymakers could use to manage a country’s affairs. During World War Two, economists and statisticians entered into government positions and used GNP estimates to guide wartime procurement policy and mobilization planning.¹⁶

Across Western Europe, the United States, and Japan, leaders and economists drew inspiration from the successful incorporation of these metrics into national budgeting and planning. Policymakers believed that in the post-war world countries needed to boost production, employment, and consumption – aggressively and continuously – to avoid recurrent recessions, minimize class conflict, and support the new national welfare systems. Thus after the war ended, across the capitalist world a “politics of productivity” took hold.¹⁷ Leaders viewed the increase in national GNP as a precondition for economic prosperity and social harmony. GNP provided a common language for economic policymakers to describe the progress of their national economies. It also served as a yardstick leaders used to compare capitalist productivity against that of the Soviet Union in the global Cold War. In this context, international development experts adopted GNP as a way of articulating different levels of development in their international comparisons, which reinforced to policymakers the dangerous state of “underdevelopment” across the so-called “Third World” and helped to justify new foreign aid programs.¹⁸

While the popularity of GNP among policymakers in the West contributed to development experts’ enthusiasm for the metric, there were other important incentives for the post-colonial world to adopt it, as well. The requirements set in place to join new international organizations reinforced the need for national in-

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¹⁷ Maier, “The Politics of Productivity.”
come figures. For example, the United Nations calculated member dues on the basis of national income and the World Bank used estimates of national income as the basis for determining loan repayment rates. During the 1950s and 1960s, then, GNP went global as countries began to pursue GNP growth as their foremost economic goal.

Historians have also demonstrated how the promise of economic growth measured in GNP captivated the minds of leaders and policymakers throughout the Third World. All around the world, leaders spoke the language of growth and adopted GNP by the 1960s. In India, Prasanta Mahalanobis and Jawaharlal Nehru, the country’s first post-independence prime minister, embraced GNP growth as the “means to build a modern nation,” in David Engerman’s words. Daniel Speich Chassé tells a similar story of about post-colonial Kenya. There, Tom Mboya, the country’s Minister of Justice and leading development voice, claimed that the goal of his country’s economic planning was to “attain higher growth rates of our national income and, therefore, achieve higher living standards for all people.” Post-colonial leaders relied upon aggregate economic statistics to set targets and define the parameters of national policymaking. As Alden Young reveals in his book on post-colonial Sudan, national economic planning based on economic metrics was central to post-colonial state building because planning enabled elite bargaining and bureaucratic consensus-building. The “project of governing Sudan,” he writes, “was transformed from the management of a collection of distinct populations, each with its own attributes, to the management of a national economy made up of equal individuals, whose preferences policymakers assumed could be aggregated and even maximized.” Sudanese leaders “fetishized the ‘economy.’” Statistical abstractions such as GNP became a “means of representing a successful government.” If Sudanese planners met the targets laid out in their plans, they could then earn public legitimacy to justify their continued rule.

In practice, leaders often struggled to manage their economic life and reach the heights promised by the parade of statistics and developmental interventions.

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22 Speich Chassé, “The Use of Global Abstractions,” 26; Speich, “Travelling with the GDP.”
23 Young, *Transforming Sudan*, 14.
24 Young, *Transforming Sudan*, 17.
that came to symbolize the future in the period of global decolonization. And local leaders rarely tried to fit universal models without considerable adaption. Mahalanobis, for instance, adopted Keynesian macroeconomic measures but not Keynesian policies, opting instead for a more concerted central planning approach modeled loosely on the Soviet Union. Moreover, scarcely did local social practices reflect the soaring rhetoric put forth by so many elites. But historians have shown GNP growth became central to national self-representation for nationalist leaders worldwide. Statistical activities such as measuring national income and product “became central to articulating and elaborating decolonial ideas about economic uplift and fairness,” as well. As Speich Chassé notes, “In the imagination of the heroes of African independence such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana or Tom Mboya in Kenya, political sovereignty necessarily had to be followed by major schemes of statistically rendering the body politic in view of national development goals” and they needed “a stable comparative framework in order to legitimize their claims.” Economic statistics such as GNP created the framework that permitted easy international comparison and national expression of future goals, present problems, and past injustices.

The Cold War conflict further reinforced the primacy of GNP growth in the Third World countries and conditioned the way in which the superpowers interpreted and understood the politics of decolonization. The growing consensus among experts in the United States during the late 1940s was that radicalism and communism stemmed from poverty and an absence of economic growth. Economic measurements furnished US policymakers with the tools they used to analyze the Third World. US leaders held up GNP growth rates as indicators of success for their foreign aid programs. Soviet officials likewise made rapid economic growth a promise for their allies, and they sent experts and aid abroad throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s to countries such as India, Egypt, and Ghana. During the Khrushchev era, the Soviet Union nurtured its own field of development economics, with Soviet scholars drawing often on the Soviet experience in Central Asia and emphasizing central planning, mechanization of agriculture, and industrialization (for some, though not all, countries). In all cases, as the historian Alessandro Iandolo shows, the “state was to be the only engine

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of growth” as the Soviet proposed their own models of national economic growth for the Third World. By the early 1960s, Mao's China also jostled for support among fledgling communist parties throughout the Third World, often inciting conflicts with Soviet-backed communist and nationalist regimes, such as in India and Algeria.

By the early 1960s, growth rhetoric had truly gone global. In late 1961, the UN General Assembly proclaimed the 1960s as the “United Nations Development Decade” (on President Kennedy's urging). To give the phrase meaning, the General Assembly encouraged all developing countries to set GNP growth rate targets of at least five % per year. This target-setting solidified GNP as the dominant discursive framework for conceptualizing national economic life at the international level, in organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In national governments and international organizations alike, economic measurement became part and parcel of international development. Historians of growth and foreign aid have collectively revealed how important the measurement of development was to structuring how countries defined what developmental success actually meant. With GNP used to define independent nation-states’ relative levels of development, Daniel Speich Chassé claims that “a new comparative statistical perception of the world became dominant.” In other words, GNP defined how leaders conceptualized developmental success.

Economic Measurement, Nationalism, and Developmental Politics

The global diffusion and adoption of GNP had many implications for developmental politics. One important consequence was that economic metrics shaped the nature of post-colonial state-building. Alden Young’s study of Sudanese development demonstrates how national income accounting conditioned policymakers to view their economic life in terms of national, territorial boundaries.

But this focus came with unfortunate consequences for life within the country. Young argues that Sudanese plans chose to fund development projects most likely to contribute to GNP, which obscured important regional inequalities. Barbara Weinstein has uncovered an analogous dynamic in mid-century Brazil. Weinstein claims that inter-regional inequalities deepened between urban and rural portions of the country and that broad generalizations about national economic growth obscured the policy choices that worsened spatial disparities. “Representations of São Paulo not just as producing more but as more modern and productive, and of the Nordeste as backward […] had discernible material consequences that further concentrated resources and exacerbated the process of divergence,” she argues. Scholars have identified similar trends in how statistical practices influenced post-colonial state-building choices elsewhere, too, as Poornima Paidipaty has done for India. These case studies show how national economic measurement and territorial state-building became mutually reinforcing, as leaders and policymakers conceived of the object of their development through the lens of the aggregate measurements they used to depict it.

The use of statistical targets influenced the course of post-colonial political legitimacy. For instance, when leaders staked their claims to legitimacy on the promise of economic transformation, insufficiently low growth rates could stand as symbols for the failure to deliver progress. As Brad Simpson argues in his study of Indonesia, Sukarno’s revolutionary post-colonial government struggled and ultimately lost power as the country’s high inflation and low production hampered the country’s economy by the mid-1960s. Yet few leaders deviated from the standard script that placed economic growth measured in aggregate statistics as the cornerstone of national politics. In Indonesia, General Suharto’s regime subsequently promised to improve the country’s plight once again through a “commitment to modernization and the promise of stability and rapid economic growth.” Alden Young likewise notes that throughout the first decade of Sudanese independence a “failure to achieve economic growth,” in the eyes of the first post-colonial leadership class, threatened to undermine their claims as the premier nationalist modernizers of the country and “jeopardize the independence of the nation.”

33 Young, Transforming Sudan, 3, 6, 126.
35 Paidipaty, “Testing Measures.”
37 Young, Transforming Sudan, 94.
This regime of using calculative practices for political ends shaped other aspects of political developments. For instance, Michelle Murphy analyzes how “population” became an important object of government intervention alongside the national economy for post-colonial states. She narrates the relationship between the two – population and economy – as evidence of a broader “economization of life” during the mid-twentieth century. She presents a set of practices that “differentially value and govern life in terms of their ability to foster the macroeconomy of the nation-state,” such as how life contributed (or detracted) from gross domestic product (GDP). Whereas income and product accounts marked forms of aggregate economic activity abstracted from labor, “population” marked an aggregation of human lives that could be managed and modeled as a unitary whole. As a category, population conjured a “phantasmagram”: population growth, like GDP, was a metric that was “enriched with affect, propagate imaginaries, lure feeling, and hence have supernatural effects in surplus of their rational precepts.” Measuring population and economic growth were intertwined. She exposes how American social scientists calculated the value of “averted birth” (humans not born as a result of family practices, calculated in terms of their potential effect on GDP) in countries such Taiwan and South Korea to persuade governments that population control measures would redound to their economic benefit (and all the while assuage the racist fears of elites in the Global North about population growth in the Global South).

Similarly, many historians have analyzed how the measurement of population engendered widespread fears and justified a variety of interventions to control its growth. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, demographers’ calculations of future population growth stirred popular anxieties that rapid increases in population would spark Malthusian crises. Matthew Connelly shows that even though these projections rarely occurred as predicted, they were “still taken as irrefutable signs of inevitable doom” that both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) used to justify coercive population control campaigns in the Third World.

Measurement practices also shaped the international politics of development by becoming an important issue around which international cooperation took place. Recent scholarship has highlighted how attempts to create global

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40 Murphy, *Economization*, 47–49.
measurements often influenced the course of international development endeavors in favor of homogenization. In her study of the World Agricultural Census, conducted by the International Institute of Agriculture (the forerunner of the Food and Agricultural Organizations), Amalia Ribi Forclaz details how FAO flattened the diversity of farming practices globally to a set of narrow output targets. The Census “worked as a homogenizing tool in which a wide variety of societies were defined by their agricultural outputs,” she writes. Its designers saw it “as a way to create a global picture of worldwide agricultural resources that could be used for a systematic review of the current and prospective state of nationally and regionally defined agricultural practices,” which would set the standard for future agricultural development. Yet such projects also served to build consensus among experts over how to view and perceive developmental problems. Perrin Selcer demonstrates how the UN Education, Science, and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) attempt to create a “Soil Map of the World” forged transnational community among soil experts and made possible the “construction of a global environment about which it was possible to debate issues of equity and sustainability.” Though the map had little direct impact on the development policies of any one country, the act of measuring and classifying varieties of soil and depicting them from a synoptic viewpoint cultivated a community of experts dedicated to using it to define agricultural development and environmental problems in easily understood ways.

Yet standardization of measurement practices was rarely a smooth process, and international standardization unsurprisingly rendered local variation invisible and favored that topics that were more easily constructed through widely available data collection techniques. The standardization of national income and accounting techniques provides a useful illustration. In the early attempts to quantify economic activity in the British colonies, economists noted that the large presence of subsistence production – a process neither monetized nor marketized – conducted by women was very difficult, though not impossible, to estimate. The work of British economist Phyllis Deane over the 1940s and 1950s attested the significance of this putative economic activity and the value of incorporating it into national aggregates. Sir Richard Stone, who guided the UN’s creation of a standardized System of National Accounts, ultimately decided against the inclusion of subsistence production and unwaged women’s work in

national accounts because of its variation across borders and the difficulty of acquiring data on it.\textsuperscript{44} In this instance, standardization narrowed the accepted definition of activities that could be defined as “economic” and codified the gendered politics of statistical representation. Following Deane’s work, in later years feminists critics of national income accounting argued that the choice to define waged labor as “productive” and household labor outside the production boundary reinforced a blinkered view of social value and consigned basic elements of social reproduction to the realm of “extraeconomic life” excluded from popular national metrics such as GNP.\textsuperscript{45}

### The Limits of Economic Measurement in Historical Perspective

Although much of this literature has focused on the consequences of GNP and the calculative practices associated with measurement, historians have also begun to explore alternative narratives of economic measurement in historical perspective. One strand of research focuses on the development of indicators that predated the rise of national income and products accounts or meant to supplement or displace GNP. For instance, in the early twentieth century a loose transnational movement of businessmen, workers, and liberal reformers all attempted various methods to quantify workers’ “standard of living” and use it for targeted policymaking – either for raising wages to squash competition or to redress material deprivation.\textsuperscript{46} Grace Davie’s research reveals how in South Africa, social scientist Edward Batson carried out extensive social surveys of Cape Town to create a “poverty datum line” of minimum needs for households, which reformers used to advocate for the advancement of people from poverty, much as standard of living statistics had been intended to do.\textsuperscript{47} Michele Alacevich shows how the World Bank used a range of statistics – including some standard of liv-

\textsuperscript{45} Murphy, \textit{Economization}, 33. For more on feminist criticisms of national income accounting, see Messac, “Outside the Economy.”
ing figures – in its early years before GNP took over. In these cases, scholars have highlighted how socially-oriented statistics often directed attention away from abstract national economies and towards specific groups or communities with often more redistributive goals in mind.

In addition, scholars have detailed attempts by reformers to challenge the hegemony of GNP directly. For example, Maria Bach and Mary Morgan study shifting poverty metrics within the UNDP as the organization attempted to refashion its policy priorities away from national progress and towards poverty alleviation. They argue that the shift to poverty alleviation and accompanying poverty metrics “had a two-fold power base: informationally, it was built into choices of measuring instruments because new notions of development required different kinds of poverty index numbers, but for intervention purposes—even though it invited local actions—it was still largely operated by those who had made those choices (for example, to privilege poverty reduction over growth and fiscal rectitude).”

The objects of development changed along with the new metrics. Morgan and Bach argue that the UNDP shifted “from measuring averages of the national level to measuring differences at the national and subnational level including specific subgroups of the population.” But the new shift towards bespoke and subnational metrics exposed ongoing problems with data collection. The UNDP’s sophisticated “Multidimensional Poverty Index,” which incorporated ten different variables, was only available for just over a hundred countries (even the Human Development Index, by comparison, was available for almost every country in the world. There was an important continuity between this era of debate and the rise of GNP. As Morgan and Bach note, “Poverty action required one definition, goal, and target that could create a consensus, an ‘umbrella’ that could cover the work at the UNDP, IMF, and World Bank.”

The use of new poverty metrics did not displace the broader technocratic impulse that governed development policymaking. The very act of setting quantitative targets still conditioned how policymakers mobilized resources and political will for concrete actions.

In general, studies of attempts to displace GNP with alternative metrics often featured similarity to the targets of their reforms. Often the alternative statistics rested on similar assumptions about the value of ranking and comparing nation-

50 Bach and Morgan, “Measuring Difference?,” 549.
states as a coherent whole. Daniel Speich Chassé suggests in his study of the Millennium Development Goals that the MDGs, for example, “still stuck to this methodological nationalism by imagining a global developmental ranking of nations.”\(^5\)² I have argued elsewhere in a study of multiple attempts to displace GNP over the 1970s and 1980s that new statistics reflected an underlying technocratic impulse that placed too much faith in the capacity for new numbers to generate political change and too often played down the role of political mobilization and mass politics in reshaping development policies.\(^5\)³

Along with alternative metrics, historians have also analyzed how new categories of economic measurement have shaped international development. One major new concept that emerged during the 1960s was the “informal sector.” Originally named by British anthropologist Keith Hart in his study of migrant workers in Ghana, by the early 1970s the informal sector became a distinct object of inquiry for development organizations and experts. Historian Aaron Benanav reveals that the informal sector emerged as a subject of interest as development experts grappled with the limitations of conventional categories of employment to capture accurately all the forms of labor that did not often involve formalized wages. Attempts by economists within the International Labour Organisation (ILO) during the early 1960s to construct a measure of global unemployment had not succeeded because of the inability to price and quantify labor that did not involve reliable wages. Instead, the ILO adopted informality as a way to try and categorize labor that defied existing employment classification schemes. Though this marked an attempt in the “global disarticulation of GNP measurement from an orientation towards full employment,” it also once again highlighted the challenges and value judgments inherent in economic measurement.\(^5\)⁴

Historians have also noted that international development experts were often the most skeptical and vociferous critics of dominant metrics. Across the world during the 1960s and 1970s, historians have recently uncovered a variety of reform movements to challenge the use of GNP in policymaking. To capture the social aspects of life left invisible by economic accounts and the persistent poverty and inequality within countries, a transnational movement of experts sought to introduce “social indicators” in public policy. There was also renewed interest in quantifying aspects of labor and economic activity that was unwaged and not expressed in market relations, such as “informal” labor and women’s

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52 Speich Chassé, “The Roots,” 231.
household work. Environmental critics sought to redress the ecological crises by pricing environmental externalities and constructing alternative models and metaphors for economic activity that linked economic and biophysical systems into a cohesive whole. These alternatives all drew widespread international attention, reflected the most prominent arguments among critics of economic growth, and revealed the range of debate over the meaning and measurement of international development. During this era, economists such as Simon Kuznets and Irma Adelman also challenged the empirical basis that had undergirded the intellectual justifications for dominant foreign aid programs by arguing that growth policies had often “worsened equity, poverty, and stability around the globe” and called for better data to promote new development approaches, such as satisfying basic human needs.

Historians have taken these criticisms a step further by identifying fundamental problems with the underlying data used to make claims about international development in the first place. Morten Jerven’s vast exploration of the limited data on poverty in Africa offers a valuable starting point for questioning the reliability of the “stylized facts” of African development. Jerven’s 2013 book Poor Numbers uncovers the startling details about how many African countries’ statistical departments lacked effective data collection capacity and only irregularly produced national income and product measurements. Economists’ and development experts’ common refrains about structural low growth among sub-Saharan African and chronic poverty likewise lacked a sufficient evidentiary basis. The World Bank’s World Development Indicators dataset, for instance, only contains data starting in 1960, and systemic coverage of GNP estimates only began in the mid-to-late 1960s. As a result, most economic claims about persistent low growth and poverty rest on data only for a few decades in the late twentieth century. Recent work by economic historians paints a different picture. Reconstructions

of real wages series of eight British African colonies from 1880 to 1940 indicate that real wages exceeded subsistence levels throughout the period and surpassed those in major Asian cities.\(^5\) Moreover, assessments of African poverty often relied on statistics whose meanings evolved far beyond their initial use. Vincent Bonnecase argues that statistics on nutrition and French colonial Africa only became evidence of widespread poverty decades after their initial compilation.\(^6\) This line of research shows that developmental claims about the supposedly objective state of relative development have been based on flawed data and a process of commensuration that was both “technical and political.”\(^61\)

The issues with reliable data were not lost on contemporary observers, either. In her path-breaking estimates of national income in the British colony of Northern Rhodesia during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Phyllis Deane noted that the absence of basic economic data made the estimates nearly impossible. The “great dearth of information,” she wrote, was a “serious obstacle” to producing a “comprehensive picture of the economy.” Given how little information was actually available, she added that she had to resort to “pure guesswork” in her estimates.\(^62\) Unable to convince the Colonial Office to make the collection of macroeconomic statistics a government task, Deane struggled to construct reliable income estimates despite numerous attempts into the 1950s.\(^63\) Researchers who embarked on similar endeavors to calculate national income during the late colonial and early post-colonial reported also noted that the absence of reliable data undermined the strength of their estimates from the British West Indies to Nigeria.\(^64\)

The recent historiography on alternative metrics to GNP and the flaws in calculating GNP has important implications for historical inquiry. Narratives of post-war international development tend to follow from empire, with international expert governance viewed as a coherent and cohesive form of hegemonic knowledge. Economists often appear as omniscient and excessively confident


\(^61\) Bonnecase, “When Numbers,” 481.


\(^64\) Macekura, The Mismeasure of Progress, 52–53.
in their aspirations. The power of expertise in government is taken as granted. But stories of critiques, debates, and reforms suggest something different: just how difficult it was to divine and manage the numbers of contemporary economic development; how uncertain development economists were in their methods and their application; how subsequent policymaking rested on a shaky foundation. Only by looking at the actual accounting practices does this become clear. The recent studies that described the difficulties inherent in calculating post-colonial economies attest to this. For governments to generate and maintain high levels of economic growth, they first had to measure the economic activity within their territory that could be used as a basis for charting growth over time. For this, economists first had to agree upon a standard calculation process for measuring an economy. What did it mean for the future of development if the boundaries, size, and scope of the economy – that “useful fiction” – could not be agreed upon? In the 1940s, at least, that question produced more confusion and anxiety than clear and confident answers.

Within the larger history of international development, these struggles over how best to measure national income and whether it should form the basis for policy interventions point to persistent challenges about the object – the national economy – so often assumed as a stable and meaningful entity in development rhetoric and policy. How a country measures its development goes a long way toward shaping how it pursues development. Official measurements reflect what leaders value in society, and analyzing the history of statistical constructs reveals the cultural sensibilities and ideological predilections that shaped the numbers in the first place. Yet the recent historiography demonstrates a long-standing debate over how best to measure a society, and also how to select, even more basically, what to measure. For just as long as GNP stood for national well-being and economic growth measured in terms of GNP symbolized developmental success, intellectuals and activists have questioned the usefulness of these numbers. Not only did they wonder about how well their measurement techniques traveled and ponder the meaning of the limitations of their data, but many put forth alternative metrics – from social indicators to ecologically specific ones – that expressed a differing definition of what it meant for a country to develop, how policymakers should be assessed, and how a society would express its core values. In other words, the debates over economic measurement were not an aberration. They are a core component in the longer history of international development from its inception to the present day.
Conclusion

The new histories of international development that explore the place of economic measurement have enriched our understanding of modern global history. They have analyzed how statistics influenced state-building, the trajectory of decolonization and Cold War foreign aid, the role of expertise in public policy, and how varying regimes of valuation have fallen in and out of public favor. This research thus illuminates the power and limits of technocratic governance at the national level and within the modern international system, how numerical knowledge reshaped popular expectations of governments the world over, and the ideological and experiential similarities and differences that conditioned how leaders and policymakers viewed their subject populations.

There remains more to be done, of course. Historians have only begun to explore the histories of contestation and debate over alternative metrics, the role of target-setting and its consequences for the implementation of development industry within the aid industry, the technologies of everyday development – from project reports to grant applications to research surveys – that followed from such target-setting, and the relationship between economic measurement and ecological devastation. Much of the historiography on development has homed in on the role of measurement within international organizations and national governments. There has been comparatively less focus, for instance, on how foreign aid agencies embraced target-setting and measurement techniques that shaped the conduct of actual development interventions. Along these lines, historians should explore how measurement and assessment practices shaped the social history of individuals and communities and how they influenced the environmental history of the past century. Similarly, there is more research to do to understand the recent surge of interest in sub-national metrics of development success. This research will only strengthen the valuable contributions the scholars discussed in this essay have made.

The historians of development and measurement have pointed us in a fruitful direction, as they have begun to historicize notions of developmental “success.” What, after all, did it mean for a development intervention to succeed or fail? In part, the answer to that question depended on measurement choices: projects that met a certain timeline, or boosted production by a certain quota, or contributed some specified amount to GNP growth. Likewise, for a development project to fail required developers to justify such an assessment by recourse to numerical reasoning and statistical expression. Historian Nick Cullather propos-
es that scholars should analyze development as a “narrative strategy.”\textsuperscript{65} By investigating how developers used statistics to tell stories about what development meant and what it did or did not accomplish, the new histories of development and measurement have done just that. As Prasanta Mahalanobis recognized decades ago, to tell stories about a country’s development requires statistics, just as the construction of statistics is inextricably bound up with the process of economic and social change.

\textsuperscript{65} Nick Cullather, \textit{The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 183.