

“From Seers to Sen: The Meaning of Economic Development”

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How has the meaning of economic development changed during the twenty years of WIDER’s existence? Two markers are Dudley Seers, “The Meaning of Development” (1967, 1979), for the earlier period and Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (1999), for the later. Here the meaning of development also encompasses measures and strategies of development and approaches to its study. Moreover, I examine works beyond these markers to provide more detail of the two men’s views.

Both men were critical of the development literature of their times. For Seers, neoclassical economics had a flawed paradigm and dependency theory a lack of policy realism. After the fall of state socialism in 1989-1991, the ideological struggles among economists diminished. Neoclassicism’s Washington Consensus of the World Bank, IMF, and the U.S. government reigned (Williamson 1993, pp. 1329-1336; 1994, pp. 26-28). Sen did not focus on ideological issues but, according to the Nobel prize committee, “restored an ethical dimension to the discussion of economic problems” such as development.

According to Seers (1979) the purpose of development is to reduce poverty, inequality, and unemployment. For Sen (1999), development involves reducing deprivation or broadening choice. Deprivation represents a multidimensional view of poverty that includes hunger, illiteracy, illness and poor health, powerlessness,

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voicelessness, insecurity, humiliation, and a lack of access to basic infrastructure (Narayan et al. 2000, pp. 4-5).

Seers on Neoclassicism's Universal Claims

For Seers, neoclassical economics greatest error was its universalizing from the West's experience. For him, "The abler the student has been in absorbing the current doctrine, the more difficult the process of adaptation" to the developing world (Seers 1963, p. 77). Calling a book that analyses the United States and the United Kingdom "Economic Principles" is analogous to calling a book dealing with horses "Animals." For Seers, development economics, in analysing the 75-80 percent of the world in developing countries and the past experience of industrialized economies, is closer to principles of economics (ibid., p. 79).

Seers on Growth as the Objective

Immediately after World War II, scholars and third-world governments were concerned with wider objectives than simply growth. However W. Arthur Lewis (1955, p. 9) set the tone for the late 1950s and 1960s when he noted that "our subject matter is growth, and not distribution." But the stress of the UN's first development decade (1960-70) on less-developed countries' (LDCs') economic growth, which many alleged did not spread to the poorer half of the population, triggered widespread disillusionment. In 1969, Seers

signalled the shift away from the goal of growth by asking the following questions about a country's development:

What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have become less severe, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result "development," even if per capita income has soared (Seers 1969, pp. 3-4).²

Measuring Seers' Goals

Since 1969, economists have made little progress in measuring unemployment rates, at least in LDCs with a majority agricultural labour force. Poverty and inequality data have improved substantially, with efforts at the World Bank by Shail Jain (1975), Chenery et al (1974), and Ahluwalia, Carter, and Chenery (1979, pp. 299-341) to make cross-national comparisons of poverty, and subsequent contributions by such economists as Klaus Deininger, Lyn Squire, Martin Ravallion, and Branko Milanovic.

However, presently we have cross-national figures on poverty and inequality but few by region or community within a nation, the figures Seers considered essential for policy. Identifying and reaching the poor to enable their geographical targeting requires

2. See also Viner (1953, pp. 99-100), and Chenery et al. (1974) for similar expressions, and Meier's (2005, pp. 4-5) discussion of them.

detailed poverty mapping, with data on poverty assessment and “basic needs” indicators at local levels (San Martin 2003, pp. 172-192). Few national surveys are adequate for “guid[ing] poverty alleviation efforts aimed at attacking poverty at local levels” (ibid., 2003, p. 173).

Was Seers naïve in setting goals that lacked policy-relevant measures in most LDCs? No. Today’s scarcity of sub-national poverty information would not have surprised him. “Those who hold power rarely have much interest in such matters, still less in attention being drawn to them. It is preferable to shelter behind the ‘growth rates’ that are commended in the reports of international agencies” (Seers 1983, p. 6).

Seers blames LDC governments’ inadequate information on a lack of will rather than competence. LDCs have

virtually no statistics anywhere on most of the aspects of life that really matter—the average distance people have to carry water and food; the numbers without shoes; the extent of overcrowding, the prevalence of violence; how many are unable to multiply one number by another, or summarize their own country’s history. . . . Naturally, there are no official data anywhere on the number tortured or killed by the police, or how many are in prison for political reasons. . . . Many of the more important social factors are inherently unquantifiable: how safe it is to criticize the government publicly, or the chance of an objective trial, or how corruption affects policy decisions. But to say that these factors cannot be quantified—and are embarrassing subjects for those in power . . . does not mean that

they are unimportant or can be overlooked [when assessing] a country's development" (Seers 1983, pp. 5-6).³

Seers on Dependent Development

According to dependency theory, global changes in demand resulted in a new international division of labour in which the peripheral countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America specialized in primary products in an enclave controlled by foreigners while importing consumer goods that were the fruits of technical progress in the central countries of the West. The increased productivity and new consumption patterns in peripheral countries benefited a small ruling class and its allies (less than a tenth of the population), who cooperated with the DCs to achieve modernization (economic development among a modernizing minority). The result is "peripheral capitalism, a capitalism unable to generate innovations and dependent for transformation upon decisions from the outside" (Furtado 1973:120).

Dependency theorist Andre Gunder Frank criticized the view of many development scholars that contemporary underdeveloped countries resemble the earlier stages of now-developed countries. LDCs are economic satellites of the highly developed regions of Northern America and Western Europe in the international capitalist system. The Afro-Asian and Latin American countries least integrated into this system tend to be

³ According to Seers (1983, p. 45): "Chicago-school economists are characterized by a much greater belief in quantitative techniques. They are thus more likely to restrict their analysis to variables which are quantifiable, and are particularly inclined to treat statistics as if they were facts."

the most highly developed. For Frank, Japanese economic development after 1868 is the classic case illustrating his theory. Japan's industrial growth remains unmatched: Japan, unlike most of the rest of Asia, was never a capitalist satellite. Seers generally agrees with Frank on Japan, but emphasizes its selective borrowing, its slow pace of Westernization, and “an elite that has remained firmly Japanese” (Seers 1983:72).

In his economic analysis, Seers, like the *dependencias* and unlike orthodox development economics of his day, included class, power, and imperialism by strong governments and economies against weak ones (Seers 1983:47). Seers was an admirer of Raul Prebisch, who analysed the world economy in terms of a “core” of industrial countries and a weak “periphery” of exporters of primary products” (Seers 1983:52). Seers appointed him to the Institute of Development Studies’ governing board, a decision reinforced for Seers when the U.K.’s Under-Secretary of Trade warned against Prebisch’s radicalism!

Fascination with Prebisch and the dependency school did not cloud Seers’ policy vision. He rejected the Prebisch-Frank policy prescription of import substitution that increased dependence on “imports of energy, intermediate goods, sophisticated equipment and technology [and] food” and high protective barriers, which “created monopolistic conditions [and] discourag[ed] innovation” (Seers 1983:53). Moreover, Seers recognized the limits of an LDC’s “room to manoeuvre” by “delinking” from the world economy, given U.S. and Western retaliation and intervention in response to expropriation of foreign capital. For him, “many who embark on an autonomous strategy with naïve optimism not merely lose power in a military coup and see their policies

reversed, but also forfeit their liberties . . . [or] even their lives.” Dependency theorists fail to recognize the constraints of too independent a policy and the importance of avoiding “the inflow of capital . . . replaced by an outflow.” His class analysis suggests that the “decline in levels of living of the professional and managerial classes” and their possible revolt reflects what dependency entails (ibid., pp. 53-61). While dependent governments can take advantage of the internal divisions of the dominant power, they are limited by how inflation and the reduction of foreign exchange reserves can undermine support for populism (ibid., pp. 61, 126).⁴

Seers on Development Planning

Deepak Lal’s *Poverty of “Development Economics”* (1985, pp. 70-74) contends that LDC intellectuals, nationalist leaders, and politicians, in reacting to colonial capitalism, pushed for systematic state economic planning and intervention, especially in industry, to remove these deep-seated, capitalistic obstacles. Apparently Lal (1985, p. 103) views Seers as a proponent of *dirigisme* (statism).

But Seers (1983, pp. 94-95) is sceptical of typical LDC state planning:

Today, ‘planning’ calls up memories of teams of economic graduates, who would doubtless otherwise have been unemployed, frenetically drawing up five-year plans, largely quantitative and wholly economic, to be published with a good deal

⁴Seers (1983, p. 146) also rejects calls for the new international economic order, seeing it as an effort to maintain national elites’ subjugation of the poor.

of fanfare. This is often good public relations, but whether it has much impact on [policy is] a different matter. Rarely does such a team have any real authority. . . . Typically, after a year or two, a plan is a dead letter: by then, the . . . assumptions and . . . projections are clearly out of date, and the planning office is happily buckling down to prepare the next one. . . . It is time to move to quite a different type of planning--longer-term, less economic, not entirely quantitative.

For Seers, LDCs should emphasize development strategy, not planning for a large part of the economy (that is, the private sector) over which government has little control. Moreover, planning needs to be well integrated, with departments communicating with each other, and planners in contact with political leaders “on almost a day-to-day basis” (ibid., p. 114).

Sen's Economic Goals

For Sen (1999), freedom (not development) is the ultimate goal of economic life as well as the most efficient means of realizing general welfare. Overcoming deprivations is central to development. Unfreedoms include hunger, famine, ignorance, an unsustainable economic life, unemployment, barriers to economic fulfilment by women or minority communities, premature death, violation of political freedom and basic liberty, threats to the environment, and little access to health, sanitation, or clean water. Freedom of exchange, labour contract, social opportunities, and protective security are not just ends

or constituent components of development but also important means to development and freedom.

Sen's welfare theory relies not on individuals' attainments (of basic needs) but individuals' capabilities, an approach he believes can draw on a richer information base. From a feasible capability set, Sen focuses on a small number of basic functionings central to well-being. For Sen, living consists of the effective freedom of a person to achieve states of beings and doings, or a vector of functionings. He does not assign particular weights to these functionings, as well-being is a "broad and partly opaque concept," which is intrinsically ambiguous.

Sen focuses on a small number of basic functionings central to well-being, such as being adequately nourished, avoiding premature mortality, appearing in public without shame, being happy, and being free. This freedom to attain, rather than the functionings themselves, is the primary goal, meaning that capability does not correlate closely to attainment, such as income. One example is life expectancy, a proxy for health, which, at 77 years, is as high for Costa Rica as for the U.S., which has an income per head nine times as high. Moreover, men in the Harlem district of New York City, despite the capability sets and choices available to the U.S. society, have less chance of living to 40 years than men in Bangladesh. This is not because Harlem has a lower GNP per capita than Bangladesh, Sen explains, but because of the high urban crime rate, inadequacy of medical attention, racism, and other factors that reduce Harlem's basic attainments. Although people in Harlem have a greater command of resources than those in Bangladesh, the costs of social functionings, which include avoiding public shame and participating in the life of the community, are higher for Harlem residents (as well as U.S.

residents generally, Sen argues) than for Bangladeshis (Sen 1973, 1981, 1987a, 1992, 1999; Sugden 1993, pp. 1947-1962; McCord and Freeman 1990).

For Sen (1992, pp. 102-116), poverty is not low well-being but the inability to pursue well-being because of the lack of economic means. He argues against relying only on poverty percentage or headcount approach (H) to measure poverty and deprivation, the approach of World Bank economists, Ahluwalia, Carter, and Chenery (1979, pp. 299-341). As Blackwood and Lynch (1994, p. 569) assert in their criticism of Ahluwalia et al.: "Poverty does not end abruptly once an additional dollar of income raises a family's (or individual's) income beyond a discretely defined poverty line. It is more accurate to conceive of poverty as a continuous function of varying gradation." In addition to (H), Sen contends, we need an income-gap approach (I), which measures the additional income needed to bring the poor up to the level of the poverty line, and the distribution of income or Gini coefficient (G) among the poor. Combining G, H, and I, which together represent the Sen measure for assessing the seriousness of absolute poverty, satisfies Sen's three axioms for a poverty index: (1) the focus axiom, which stipulates that the measure depend only on the incomes of the poor, (2) the monotonicity axiom, which requires that the poverty index increase when the incomes of the poor decrease, and (3) the weak transfer axiom, which requires that the poverty measure be sensitive to changes in the income distribution of the poor (so that a transfer of income from a lower-income poor household to a higher-income household increases the index).

The World Bank, which became convinced of the validity of Sen's critique of Bank analyses of poverty by 1990, defines the income or poverty gap as "the mean shortfall from the poverty line (counting the nonpoor as having zero shortfall), expressed

as a percentage of the poverty line. This measure reflects the depth of poverty as well as its incidence.” In 2000, Bangladesh’s \$1/day headcount poverty rate was 36.0 percent, while its \$1/day poverty gap was 8.1 percent (World Bank 2003b, pp. 58-61). While 36 percent of Bangladesh's population was extremely poor, a transfer of 8.1 percent of GNP would bring the income of every extremely poor person exactly up to the \$1/day line. In China, while \$1/day poverty was 16.1 percent, the cost of bringing the income of these poor to the \$1/day line was only 3.7 percent (ibid., p. 58). For LDCs generally, 19-percent \$1/day poverty (World Bank 2003a, pp. 30-31) could be reduced by a 1-percent transfer from LDC consumption or a one-half of one-percent transfer from world consumption. This assumes perfect non-distortionary targeting to the extreme poor without reducing mean consumption. Alas, we do not have perfect information to identify the poor nor do we know the effect of this transfer on the income of the nonpoor. Yet we have information on countries with extreme poverty and some information on the regions, classes, and communities of the extreme poor.

Sen’s View of Gender Inequality

Sen’s discussion of income distribution includes intra-family and gender inequality, missing in Seers’ analysis of 1979. For Sen (1993), the most obvious example of cultures’ anti-female biases is the “missing” women of India and China, their deficits of females from infanticide and anti-female health biases compared to a benchmark or norm for the ratio of females to males.

In China, where the state irregularly enforced a "one couple, one child" policy, expectant couples may use sonograms to identify the gender of the fetus, sometimes aborting female children. Moreover, a small fraction of Indian and Chinese couples practice female infanticide. Additionally, in Mumbai, India, women had to be more seriously ill than men to be taken to a hospital. India, China, and the Middle East, with low female to male ratios, have a bias in nutrition and health care that favours males. Discrimination against women in schools, jobs, and other economic opportunities lies behind the bias against the care of females within the family (Sen 1993, pp. 40-47).

Sen's View of Food Entitlements, the State, and Famines

Econometric and case-study evidence indicates that war and state violence increase nutritional vulnerability (Nafziger, Stewart, & Väyrynen 2000; Nafziger and Auvinen 2003). Relief agencies indicate 20 million deaths from severe malnutrition in 1991 in six African countries where food trade was disrupted by domestic political conflict-- Ethiopia, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Angola, and Mozambique. Moreover, while, on the one hand, food deficits contribute to refugee problems, on the other hand, the five million or so refugees annually fleeing civil wars, natural disasters, and political repression (including before 1990, South Africa's destabilization) added to Africa's food shortages (Daley 1992, p. 115; Goliber 1989, pp. 10-11).

The conventional economic approach examines food (or total) output and its distribution, focusing on agricultural production, poverty rates, and Gini indices of concentration. According to this explanation, famine arises from a decline in food

availability (Ravallion 1997, pp. 1207-08). Amartya Sen (1981, 1983b) and Drèze and Sen (1989), criticize this explanation, emphasizing that nutrition depends on society's system of entitlement. Entitlement refers to the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she possesses. An entitlement helps people acquire capabilities (like being well nourished). In a market economy, the entitlement limit is based on ownership of factors of production and exchange possibilities (through trade or a shift in production possibilities). For most people, entitlement depends on the ability to find a job, the wage rate, and the prices of commodities bought. In a welfare or socialist economy, entitlement also depends on what families can obtain from the state through the established system of command. A hungry, destitute person will be entitled to something to eat, not by society's low Gini inequality and a high food output per capita, but by a relief system offering free food. Thus, in 1974, thousands of people died in Bangladesh despite its low inequality, because floods reduced rural employment along with output, and inflation cut rural labourers' purchasing power.

Sen argues that food is “purchased” with political pressure as well as income. Accordingly, one-third of the Indian population goes to bed hungry every night and leads a life ravaged by regular deprivation. India's social system takes nonacute endemic hunger in stride; there are no headlines or riots. But while India's politicians do not provide entitlements for chronic or endemic malnutrition, they do so for potential severe famine through food imports, redistribution, and relief. In Maoist China, the situation was almost the opposite. Its political commitment ensured lower regular malnutrition through more equal access to means of livelihood and state-provided entitlement to basic needs of

food, clothing, and shelter. In a normal year, China's poor were much better fed than India's. Yet if there was a political and economic crisis that confused the regime so that it pursued disastrous policies with confident dogmatism, then it could not be forced to change its policies by crusading newspapers or effective political opposition pressure, as in India (Sen 1983a, pp. 757-60; Sen 1983b; Sen 1986, pp. 125-32; Sen 1987b, pp.10-14).

The Nafziger-Auvinen political economy approach (2003, pp. 138-140) analyses the behaviour of ruling elites during periods of Darwinian pressures and food crises. This approach goes beyond Sen to examine ruling elites' deliberate withholding of entitlement, or even use of violence, to achieve their goals of acquiring or maintaining power, which often involves benefits at the expenses of other segments of the population. Thus, according to this political economy analysis, Mao's effort to increase control (and reduce the influence of pragmatist Liu Shaochi) through collective-intensive water projects during the 1958-60 Great Leap Forward contributed to China's famine, in which per capita food production from 1957-59 to 1959-61 dropped 25 per cent. Indeed amid Mao's campaign for increasing collectivization in 1959, the pressure of the party establishment contributed to false reports of bumper crops (Prybyla 1970, pp. 264-69; Lardy 1983, pp. 152-53; Putterman 1993, p. 11; Ravallion 1997, pp. 1225-26).

Sen's (1981, p. 44) "entitlement approach to starvation and famine concentrates on the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the

society” and not “for example illegal transfers (e.g. looting).”⁵ Sen, using this approach, turns a blind eye to the possibility that the state may be the cause of famine through deliberate policy to transfer resources and food entitlements from a politically marginal group to a politically favoured one. To be sure, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (1989, pp. 5-6) point out that, “The dependence of one group's ability to command food on its relative position and comparative power vis-à-vis other groups can be especially important in a market economy.” But for Sen and his coauthor, famines and food shortages result from entitlement and state policy failure, and not from state action to damage the food entitlements of a group. They attribute the Soviet famines of the 1930s and the Kampuchean famines of the late 1970s to inflexible government policies that undermined the power of particular sections of the population to command food. Drèze and Sen's emphasis is on the need for public action by a benign state, making decisions about more or less food entitlements, rather than an ill-intentioned state, with much of the population facing a dog-eat-dog existence, making decisions to intervene in favour of one group at the expense of another and its food entitlement. For Drèze and Sen (1989, pp.17-8), avoiding famine involves the “division of benefits [from the] differential pulls coming from divergent interest groups,” not stopping the denial of groups' entitlements to food illegally or extra-legally.

As Keen (1994, p. 5) contends, in Drèze and Sen's view, “There are victims of famine, but few immediate culprits or beneficiaries.” Drèze and Sen do not consider the

⁵For Drèze and Sen (1989, p. 22), “It would be, particularly, a mistake to relate the causation of famines to violations of legality. . . . the millions that die in a famine typically die in an astonishingly ‘legal’ and ‘orderly’ way.”

possibility that states or politically powerful groups that control states may obstruct relief and contribute to famine for rational purposes of their own. Indeed the Drèze and Sen conception of the state is essentially a liberal one, in which the failure to factor in the public interest is perceived as a failure of public policy. Most scholars and international agencies share the Drèze-Sen view, widely perceiving famine as relief “blunders” and the result of poverty and market forces, and failing to see how markets are shaped or forced by state-condoned raiding, collusion, and intimidation (as in Darfur in 2005). Sen’s approach understates the extent to which starvation is in weak or failed states whose rulers perpetuate violence and withhold food against large numbers of their people.

Conclusion

In the last 20-30 years, changing events and new disciplinary tools have changed development economics substantially. Despite these changes, many controversies about the meaning of development remain. Yet there is an underlying consensus within the development community for the need to accelerate growth and reduce hunger, poverty, illiteracy, preventable disease, LDC debt burdens, gender inequality, and unsustainable environmental damage.

Perhaps development economists can become public intellectuals to stop the declining commitment to development and interest in its meaning. Can today’s economists, similar to Dudley Seers (1920-1983) and Amartya Sen (1933-), muster the passion, pragmatism, and communication skills to lobby for development? Yes. Sen speaks frequently in the West and South Asia about the importance of development

issues. I list two examples of others who have joined the public dialogue on the meaning and importance of development. Joseph Stiglitz's insights from his World Bank and U.S. Council of Economic Advisors experience provide a platform for addressing the general public on development issues. Jeffrey Sachs, advisor to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on poverty, has popularized discussions on how to end poverty. The goals of Seers and Sen to reduce deprivation and discrimination and their scepticism about nations' commitments to these reductions still resonate within the development community.

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