



“Summary of article by Naila Kabeer: Connecting, Extending, Reversing: Development from a Gender Perspective” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 308-312

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### **“Summary of article by Naila Kabeer: Connecting, Extending, Reversing: Development from a Gender Perspective”**

There are many flaws in the core assumptions of standard development paradigms, as well as in alternative paradigms called for by the South. One of the most important of these flaws is the continuing confusion between the means and the ends of the development process, a problem that is fostered by the use of GNP as the key indicator. Another is the recognition of only certain kinds of inequalities in the development process while others, such as gender inequality, are largely ignored. Development must be reconceptualized starting from the vantage point of poor women before equity and a real transformation of society can be achieved.

### **POWER, RESOURCES, AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

Development is a problematic concept. "In its narrow meaning, it refers to the planned process by which resources, techniques and expertise are brought together to bring about improved rates of economic growth." [69] In its broader sense, development can be conceived of as a far reaching process of social transformation with varied, and often conflicting goals that can have both negative and positive connotations and outcomes. For some it may mean the expansion of individual choice, while for others it has simply "defined new conditions of constraint, enriching a few, impoverishing the many, and in the process eroding both cultural and biological diversity." [70]

Power in the development field, as in others, is derived from control over both resources and ideas, each of which reinforces the other. Gandhi observed that the world has enough resources to meet everyone's basic needs, but not enough to satisfy the greed of a few. Yet the power wielded in the development process by particular members of international financial institutions precludes the global redistribution that is seen by the South as a prerequisite for poverty alleviation and meeting basic needs. Assistance therefore flows to countries that best represent donor interests, rather than to the poorest and most needy. Furthermore, significant shares of aid expenditures must often be made in the donor countries themselves, rather than in recipient countries where they can produce more good. However, though the South and the North often pursue substantially different development goals, they have still both managed to ignore gender inequalities.

Power has influenced the development process through the control of perspectives and ideas. The dominant world-view espouses a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges scientific, positivist knowledge over local, experimental understandings and rewards detached, neutral observers over

involved, committed participants. This reductionist approach treats both natural and scientific phenomena as mechanical and divisible parcels, rather than dynamic elements in an organic system. Social reality is thus partitioned into component parts - politics, culture, and economy - and policy analysis is separated into means and ends. This approach ignores the blurred boundaries between these areas, and the complex interactions that relate the parts and the whole.

Methodological reductionism has served dominant interests. It has allowed the linkage between the exploitation of elements - material resources or human beings - and the whole to be concealed or overlooked. This is demonstrated by the global effects of capitalist exploitation of resources and the domination of the poor by those who control material resources. The supposedly gender-neutral models and development paradigms that arise from this reductionist approach explain why gender has been neglected as a category of analysis and why this failing has been so successfully obscured from view.

### **CONFUSING MEANS AND ENDS**

With the exception of a brief respite in the 1970s when the focus shifted to basic needs and redistribution, economic growth has generally stood at the core of influential development models. Although proponents of this approach acknowledge that economic growth is a means towards development rather than an end in itself, the conceptual separation of means and ends still causes more attention to be directed toward the rate of economic growth than toward its pattern. As a result, there has never been any serious implementation of redistribution measures at the national or international levels. Moreover, "[t]he confusion between means and ends, between growth and development, has served a very real political agenda." [75] Energy and resources are diverted to maintaining economic growth, which is pursued with little concern for equity, while redistribution is continuously postponed. This is justified on various pretexts in order to support the preference of elites for continued growth and their satisfaction with the status quo. Thus distributional issues are neglected on conceptual, political, and economic grounds with serious implications for equity, especially gender equity.

This means-ends confusion can be traced to the long-standing use of GNP as a convenient and simple indicator of a country's level of development. However, per capita GNP growth has not solved the social and political problems of development, leading Seers to challenge the positivists' value-free view of development. He argues that "[d]evelopment is inevitably a normative concept, almost a synonym for improvement. To pretend otherwise is just to hide one's value judgments."<sup>1</sup>

GNP is not a value-free measure "because the market itself is a highly partial mechanism for assigning value." [76] GNP only measures activities and resources that are exchanged; it equates the value of goods with the market prices they command (or could command), while consigning a wide variety of goods and activities, especially many of the activities performed by women in the household, to a "black hole" in economic theory. This pricing mechanism is a deeply value-laden measure of worth. It implies that the value of a good lies not in its ability to meet human need, but in the price it commands in the marketplace.

This approach is not only unwilling, but also unable to recognize the value of goods and services not supplied by or demanded in the market. This fosters an ideology that only those values that can be measured in monetary terms matter. As a result, "within a market-led framework of development planning, certain categories of `demand' and `supply' are given secondary status in defining the means and ends of economic growth because the market is not capable of assigning a value to them." [77] Since the housework of women does not earn income and their labor in the marketplace is often confined to casual and low-paying sectors, the productive activity and demands of women are not adequately measured in GNP; women are consequently ignored by planners. The same holds true for other nonmarket-oriented assets such as domestic labor and the natural environment that are afforded no recognized value.

This conflation of prices and values not only distorts macro-level analyses, but also micro-level project planning which focus on GNP components. For example, many subsistence and networking activities that occur outside of the formal market system, upon which the market (and many of the poor) rely, are neglected or incorporated only to the extent that "shadow" prices can represent them. These uncounted prior activities include the production, care, and wellbeing of the human laborforce, activities that are neither marketed nor likely to be responsive to market prices. Economists obscure these prior activities by treating labor as a "given" factor of production.

This orientation toward development thinking and planning, and the resource allocations it legitimates, begins to make sense when we consider the interests served by this approach, i.e., interests that link power and ideas in the development field. Development efforts and resources focus on "tip of the iceberg" activities where women, especially poor women, are underrepresented. Women's work is thus taken for granted, and the voices of women are ignored. They only enter the policy debate as unproductive recipients of welfare assistance that do not have legitimate claims to the national development budget.

## **REVERSALS IN THINKING**

Transforming development possibilities requires reversing the hierarchies of values embedded within the conventional methods of analysis, beginning with the generation of knowledge. Knowledge is constructed, not discovered, and reflects the interests of the dominant classes by justifying their position with particular interpretations of reality and the sources of poverty. Alternative development theories and practices should be nurtured by giving poor women a voice and viewing issues from their vantage point - not to the exclusion of all other viewpoint, but to realign the basis of development thinking more closely with "the real order of things." [81] It is not that only the dispossessed women of the Third World matter, but rather that without the transformation of their lives, there can be neither development nor equity. Such reversals will not only help poor women, but all oppressed groups.

Critics of dominant development paradigms do not always agree on how to produce alternatives. Some take the position that all methods of gathering knowledge are inherently oppressive, that objectivity is unattainable, and that research and the creation of theoretically informed policy and practice is therefore impossible. This reasoning concludes that unified thought cannot emerge because knowledge is dependent on values. An alternative approach is to acknowledge the

influence of underlying values and to make them explicit, rather than denying their presence and shrouding them in neutralizing, positivist language.

Focusing on the ends of the development process reveals the need to reverse allocational priorities and the advantages of making human life and wellbeing the focus of planning, i.e., valuing means in terms of their contribution to the goal. Human activities should be valued on the basis of how well they satisfy present or future human needs; markets should be recognized as simply one of a variety of institutional mechanisms for meeting these needs, rather than as the sole arbiter of value. While economic growth is a necessary foundation for investment in human welfare, growth likewise requires human health and wellbeing. If the growth rate declines because of increasing investment in human welfare, this should be regarded as a "trade-off between different kinds of development." [84] Evaluating the terms of tradeoff will require a view of development based on complementary indicators of GNP that monitor sustainable human welfare as the end, rather than a means to increase the volume of marketed goods and services.

The reversals required go beyond criticizing the neo-liberal agenda of freemarket promotion or the hostility towards interventionist policies that seek to equalize access to the market or welfare services. These reversals provide a new paradigm that calls for the "social management of the market."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. D. Seers, "The Meaning of Development," *Development Theory: Four Critical Studies*, D. Lehman, ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1979), 9-24.

<sup>2</sup>. D. Elson, "Market Socialism or Socialization of the Market?" *New Left Review* no, 172, 3-44.