

Ten Consequential and Actionable ‘Social’ Contributions to the Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of Development

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WORLD BANK GROUP

Development Economics
Development Research Group
March 2025

Abstract

Understandings of what is unique and consequential about ‘social’ development vis-à-vis other sectoral domains have evolved considerably over the past eight decades, with the present articulations enjoying broad acceptance in theory while often being ignored in practice. Although administrative imperatives within large organizations may require social development to have a stand-alone operational portfolio, this paper argues that its impact would be greatly

enhanced if its distinctive contributions were incorporated into everyday activity in all development sectors. The paper outlines 10 such actionable ‘social’ contributions, making a case for why and how they matter—intrinsically and instrumentally—across mainstream concerns regarding development processes and outcomes, in poor and rich countries alike.

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**Ten Consequential and Actionable ‘Social’ Contributions
to the Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of Development**

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Keywords: Social development, culture, reflexivity, context, participation

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors alone, who are long-standing members of the World Bank’s Development Research Group. Its contents should not be attributed to the World Bank more generally, to its executive directors or the countries they represent, or to the World Bank’s Department for Social Development. Email addresses for correspondence: vrao@worldbank.org and mwoolcock@worldbank.org.

Introduction

The linguistic space within which ‘social development’ resides – in English certainly, but essentially all other languages as well – is fraught. Even within academia itself, ‘social development’ can mean many things; there is an established scholarly journal with this [exact title](#), for example, but it has nothing at all to do with ‘development’ as understood by readers of this paper; rather, it is a “scientific journal covering developmental psychology, with a specific focus on children's behavioral development.” There may be vastly less ambiguity regarding ‘economic development,’ but even this concept can mean different things in different places in different languages. Consider Bahasa Indonesia, which has two different phrases for what is translated into English as ‘economic development’: one, *pembangunan*, focused on encouraging processes that, in adequate circumstances, unfold ‘naturally’ or ‘organically’ (i.e., akin to a flower blooming), and the other, *membangunan*, for those processes that are intentionally initiated and teleologically directed via the explicit deployment of human reason and resources toward a particular goal (irrigation systems, ports and highways, formal education) (see Heryanto 1988). In practice, these are two very different ways of engaging with the development process: the former regarding it as mindful “gardening” (cf. Kagan 2019), the other actively promoting “history in a hurry” (as a colleague once deftly put it). Within the economic development space itself, core constituent concepts such as ‘property rights,’ ‘value(s),’ ‘beliefs,’ ‘inclusion,’ and ‘justice’ face similar interpretive conundrums across different linguistic contexts, precisely because they are *social* concepts (or, more formally, “essentially contested concepts,” following Gallie 1956²).

For all this diversity, however, the evolution of how the ‘social’ aspects of development have been understood across the last eight decades of local, national, multilateral, bilateral, and NGO activity can be grouped into roughly four different categories.³ At the outset, social relations were regarded as *obstacles/constraints*, in which prevailing social institutions must “disintegrate,” “burst,” or be “scrapped.”⁴ In more polite company, social issues were held to be *irrelevant/indifferent* – entering new contexts, one could certainly appreciate (even celebrate) different food, music, and culture, yet see them of little or no consequence to central development concerns. As environmental issues and post-colonial voices become more prominent, certain assertive voices – rejecting much of orthodox development practice – upheld social institutions as *sacrosanct/existential*, each of the world’s seven thousand languages and corresponding cultures constituting wondrously unique instances of human creativity and diversity, together cumulatively comprising a veritable “ethnosphere,” any loss of which would be akin to “a bomb going off in the Louvre”⁵ and thus needing to be protected with the same moral fervor afforded species extinction. Finally, in the mid-1990s, coinciding perhaps with the First World Summit for Social Development, social relations found themselves cast as the “*missing link*” for

² “Essentially contested concepts” elide clear definitions and measurement (Gallie suggests ‘work of art’, ‘democracy’, and ‘Christian doctrine’ as examples) yet remain of central importance, doing their work through the deliberative discussions they elicit.

³ See the slightly longer discussion on these four broad categories in Woolcock (2017).

⁴ Not soon after its founding, the United Nations (1951: 15) infamously declared that “...rapid economic progress is impossible without painful adjustments. Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped: old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to burst; and large numbers of people who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated. Very few communities are willing to pay the full price of economic progress” (cited in Escobar 1995: 3). Similarly, modernization theory predominantly, though not exclusively, regarded prevailing social institutions as a constraint on development, if not the basis of ‘underdevelopment’ itself.

⁵ Davis (2009: 5), citing linguist Ken Hale.

enhancing broad economic development outcomes, for “making democracy work,” and improving the general efficacy of specific development policies and projects.⁶

Versions of these four views (or counterclaims seeking to refine or refute them) continue to this day, but here we seek to argue for a more nuanced fifth perspective, one stressing the deeply constituent roles that social development issues play across all sectors of development. In the brief sections that follow, we identify 10 key social development issues we regard as distinctive, consequential, and actionable contributions to the theory, practice, and evaluation of development.⁷

1. Measuring Development: Well-Being as Cultural and Social, Not Just Material

Measures of material well-being – such as income, consumption, income inequality, education, and infrastructure – dominate how we assess development. Such measures have their place, of course, but they exclude social and cultural aspects of the good life that are also important, such as spiritual and religious well-being, social connectedness, and cultural affinity. Many of these cannot be easily ‘counted’ (and thus become formally recognized as legitimate). Subjective welfare analysis and “happiness studies” have helped somewhat in this regard (with Bhutan even basing its entire development strategy around enhancing ‘happiness,’ not ‘growth’⁸), but they are subject to various weaknesses in interpretation and analysis. New developments in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLMs), and the analysis of narratives and open-ended interviews that they make possible at scale, may improve the tracking and salience of non-material aspects of well-being and broaden our understanding of development and its associated policies (e.g. Ashwin et al. 2022).

2. Outcomes versus Processes

Outcomes dominate the development discourse: randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for instance, are entirely focused on measuring the causal links between interventions and outcomes. The Sustainable Development Goals track outcomes that are considered important by the international community. Consequently, development focuses on what we may call “outcome policies” which operate by manipulating the levers of government – taxes, expenditures, regulations – to achieve these outcomes, and thus the success of these policies is judged by measurable improvements in those outcomes. But the specific mechanisms and associated legitimacy of processes that yield development outcomes (both positive and negative) are less emphasized (Barron et al., forthcoming). This means that the details surrounding the granular processes by which an idea turns into a complicated sequence of actions to produce an outcome are ignored; this also makes policy less effective and potentially less equitable.

A process-focused policy attempts to shift the trajectory of change (Rao 2019). Its effects can be more difficult to measure because its proximate impact is often subtle. It focuses on equalizing power relationships by shifting the process of decision-making in favor of the less privileged, and on the incremental change of one step building on the last. The full impact of a process-policy generally takes a much longer time to reveal itself but can be longer-lasting because it reduces the inequalities and

⁶ On social relations as “the missing link” in development, see Grootaert (1997); as the key to “making democracy work”, see Putnam (1993); and for the early empirical studies demonstrating positive effects on development outcomes, see Knack and Keefer (1997) (macro) and Narayan and Pritchett (1999) (micro).

⁷ See Kabeer (2015) for a different reading of the history of “the social” aspects of development. The 10 issues we have identified are broadly consistent with those of Michael Cernea, the ‘founding father’ of social development at the World Bank (see Koch-Weser and Guggenheim 2021).

⁸ See (2022) provides a compelling argument for the limits of the Bhutan model.

imperfections in how decisions are made. Examples include systems of deliberative decision-making that have constitutional sanction, political reservations for discriminated minorities and women, and adaptive systems of project implementation.

3. Reflexive Approaches to Knowledge

Those who conduct research on topics such as development, poverty, or discrimination study people who are almost always at a considerable economic, social, and cultural distance from them. This raises the important question of “Whose Reality Counts?” (Chambers 1997). Do we focus on trying to meet the current standards of rigor of our disciplines, satisfying our peer researchers, and ensuring our objectivity by maintaining an arms-length distance from those whom we research? Or is it imperative upon us to minimize the gap by discovering questions that closely reflect the interests and perspectives of our research subjects via a process of dialogue, and use methods and modes of enquiry that as closely as possible reflect their lived reality?

Burawoy (1998) argues that research of the first kind is positivist, where objectivity and detachment are the organizing principle, and the second is reflexive, where engagement, not detachment, is the primary organizing force. He further argues that “reflexive science” and “positive science” represent entirely different approaches to social science and live in separate spheres. Rao (2023) instead argues that there is a middle path between Burawoy’s sharp divide between positive and reflexive science. While economics is still a long way away from becoming a predominantly reflexive social science, there are four ways in which it can move toward greater reflexivity. All of them could be helped by deploying a judicious mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, which can facilitate (a) greater *cognitive empathy*, (b) the incorporation of qualitative and *narrative* information explicitly into our analytical toolkit, (c) a focus on understanding *processes* as well as outcomes, and (d) efforts toward greater *participation* of communities in our research.

4. Participation, Deliberation and Accountability

Policy is not just something you *do to* people; it is also *done by* people. A social approach to policy making would try to effectively bring people in, not just because it is a defining feature of open democratic procedures (linked to legitimacy concerns as noted above) but because it is the optimal strategy for resolving many (most) complex social and political issues; such challenges do not have a single technical ‘fix’ awaiting ‘experts’ to find or prioritize them, but require spaces to be created and protected for hard conversations to be had, for potentially harsh trade-offs to be acknowledged and navigated, and for some broadly legitimate form of solution/resolution to emerge from them.

Moreover, many procedures, policies, and practices do not work for everyone; they can be deployed to enhance private rather than public welfare, or to discriminate against targeted groups. Beyond formal rules and formal legal structures, much of everyday life – from routine business transactions to upholding elections – is mediated by social norms. Together, these mechanisms enable dissent to be aired in constructive ways and constitute a key means by which those in positions of power are held accountable for their actions.

Setting up effective systems of participation, deliberation, and accountability is challenging and benefits from scaling up organically from pre-existing systems that have emerged within the context, rather than inducing participation from the outside (Mansuri and Rao 2012). When done correctly, however, it can have enormous value in at least the following ways:

- Filling in the blank spaces between elections by fostering continuous dialogue between citizens and governments. This requires the creation of systems of deliberative decision-making. The “system” usually has some kind of officially sanctioned civic space – e.g., a forum or a regularly scheduled public meeting – where the average citizen is given a chance to influence directly public decisions that have a bearing on their lives. But forums alone are not enough; they need to be embedded within a culture of dialogue, debate, and discussion in which the goal is to make the act of speaking and listening an everyday practice (Heller and Rao 2015).
- Equalizing power in decision-making by giving voice to disadvantaged groups and, more radically, by reserving a percentage of seats in legislatures for representatives from such groups.
- Creating feedback loops within governments, and between governments and citizens, in which decision-making becomes adaptive and incremental. This helps governments deliver better public services and respond to the needs of citizens (World Bank 2004).

5. Social Capital and Capacities for Collective Action

Creating the capacity for collective action, or social capital, is a major challenge in development, especially since development itself can disrupt the nature and extent of prevailing social structures, for better and for worse. Understanding *how* communities work – why some are able to coordinate their activities more effectively than others, and why the design and implementation of certain policy or programmatic interventions can unlock the potential of collective action – is central to doing development (Woolcock 1998). Yet, despite important work done in anthropology, economics, and related disciplines on collective action and social networks (Dasgupta 2000; Ostrom 1990, 2009; Jackson 2008), the results of efforts to design, implement, and evaluate projects attempting to build social capital at scale have yielded widely variable outcomes (Mansuri and Rao 2012). This is largely because the design of such projects, and inferences drawn from orthodox evaluations of them, are rarely informed by social and political theory, and because such theory would strongly suggest that projects ‘inducing’ what participants experience as novel forms of social interaction are inherently likely to generate “mixed” outcomes (Woolcock 2019), and as such turn decisively on the quality of facilitation (Rao et al. 2017).

From a narrow development perspective, social capital and collective action are best mobilized not as ends in themselves but as a means to attaining public goods, enhancing the quality and accessibility of basic public services, and protecting open spaces for deliberation and conflict resolution (Gibson and Woolcock 2008).⁹ The successful projects that have attempted to mobilize and build social capital at scale have been deeply informed by reflexive empirical work (e.g., Guggenheim 2006 2021), but they remain the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, the design of such projects is based on models deemed to be successful elsewhere (thus shortchanging the important steps needed to secure local legitimacy). Their impact evaluations tend not to account for the fact that successful social interventions at scale require communities to learn from each other (via spillovers between communities), and need to accommodate detailed contextual idiosyncrasies in different communities with attentive facilitation (leading to variations in intervention outcomes). All of this makes them difficult to evaluate in general, and with RCTs in particular (Rao 2020). Building the capacity for collective action requires a different, more embedded, long-term, iterative and interactive approach to design, implementation, evaluation, and learning – practices that, alas, are rarely given the necessary level of attention (Mansuri and Rao 2012, Barron et al. 2024).

⁹ Social capital can also, of course, be curated for important intrinsic reasons.

6. Undersides of Successful Development

Economic growth is essential to improving material well-being, but attaining it could also have an underside (Asadullah et al., forthcoming). Depending on how rising incomes are distributed across groups, high levels of inequality could reduce social cohesion, resulting in a sharp increase in material desires that goes beyond gains in income – thereby resulting in increased indebtedness, rising stress as people need to work harder and longer to meet those material expectations and outsource caring for children and elders. It can also lead to a lack of respect for illiterate elders (and the decisions they make), the transition from bartering to monetized exchange for everyday necessities, adherence to rigid work schedules, ‘outsourcing’ elder care (because of fewer children being born, and fewer still, once educated, willing to stay in their village of origin to attend to parents in their sunset years).

Similarly, raising productivity means, by definition, fewer workers are needed to produce the same outcomes, leading in agriculture to mass migrations from an array of small rural villages to large urban settlements as farming becomes mechanized, with the likely ensuing loss of community, culture, and connectedness. This phenomenon – urbanization increasing with national wealth – is not only among the most robust empirical relationships in development; versions of it, along with the unwelcome social consequences (loneliness, addiction, alienation), are also manifest in high-income countries, as the influential work of Case and Deaton (2021) on “deaths of despair” in the United States has amply demonstrated.

7. Social Embeddedness

Markets are not disembodied, self-contained realms of action but distinctly human inventions (‘social constructions’) – they are products of laws, rules, and norms grounded in consent and enforceability. They are consequently deeply embedded within social and political relations. Polanyi (1944) argues that a self-regulating free market, as envisioned by liberal economists, is an unachievable utopia and that “such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human...substance of society.” Thus, the pursuit of economic growth at all costs, by unfettering the economy from regulations and government control, dis-embeds individuals and families from protective, reciprocal, social institutions and places them at the mercy of anonymous markets controlled by wealthy, politically powerful interests which can create dissatisfaction and social disorder.

8. Social Limits to Growth

Fred Hirsch (1976) has argued that growth has “social limits.” This is because “...the satisfaction that individuals derive from goods and services depends in increasing measure not only on their own consumption but on consumption by others as well.” This results in increased competition for “positional goods” where your well-being “depends on an increased extent on your relative position in the economic hierarchy,” which creates a “paradox of affluence” where most people feel much worse off even though they may be materially better off. This creates “social scarcity” and an increased privatization of public goods. This results in a loss in well-being; “...the frustration in affluence results from its very success in satisfying previously dominant material needs.” Hirsch’s ideas have been relatively neglected in development thinking but help us better understand why some high-growth countries may also have widespread dissatisfaction (e.g. Asadullah et al., forthcoming) and get caught in a “middle-income trap” (World Bank 2024).

9. Understanding History, Time, Impact Trajectories

Social change processes can evolve/unfold in highly non-linear and non-uniform ways for different groups in different contexts at different scales of operation, thereby complicating inferences drawn from impact (and other) evaluations only collecting ‘baseline’ and ‘follow-up’ data, and inferring conclusions and ‘policy implications’ in the absence of a program- and context-specific ‘theory of change’ (i.e., what outcomes it is reasonable to expect by when and by whom) (Woolcock 2022). Precisely because ‘development’ in some form has transpired across the entire existence of homo sapiens’ existence (some 200,000 years), history – both ‘the discipline’ and ‘the past’ – constitutes a vast reservoir of distinctive (and potentially actionable) knowledge (Bayly et al. 2011). Put differently, ‘the past’ is not only apprehendable on topics for which we happen to have time-series data.

10. Taking Context (and Culture) Seriously

‘Context’ is not just “out there,” a singularity waiting for a certain scholarly group’s understanding of what counts as independent “rigorous research” to discern what it is and means; development agencies and actors – along with the tools they wield, the resources they bring, and the assumptions on which they justify their actions – are themselves a manifestation of contexts, ones that are often utterly alien (even orthogonal) to those with whom they are interacting. Creating and protecting space (regarded as legitimate by both parties) to jointly navigate and negotiate such differences is rarely a priority in development practice. Effective development requires an understanding of culture as a malleable, dynamic, relational process which is deeply embedded within a society’s social and political context (Rao and Walton 2004). Taking this seriously would need a development apparatus that is less focused on moving money from donors to beneficiaries to one that is led organically – both in design and implementation – by those who are most affected by the intervention.

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