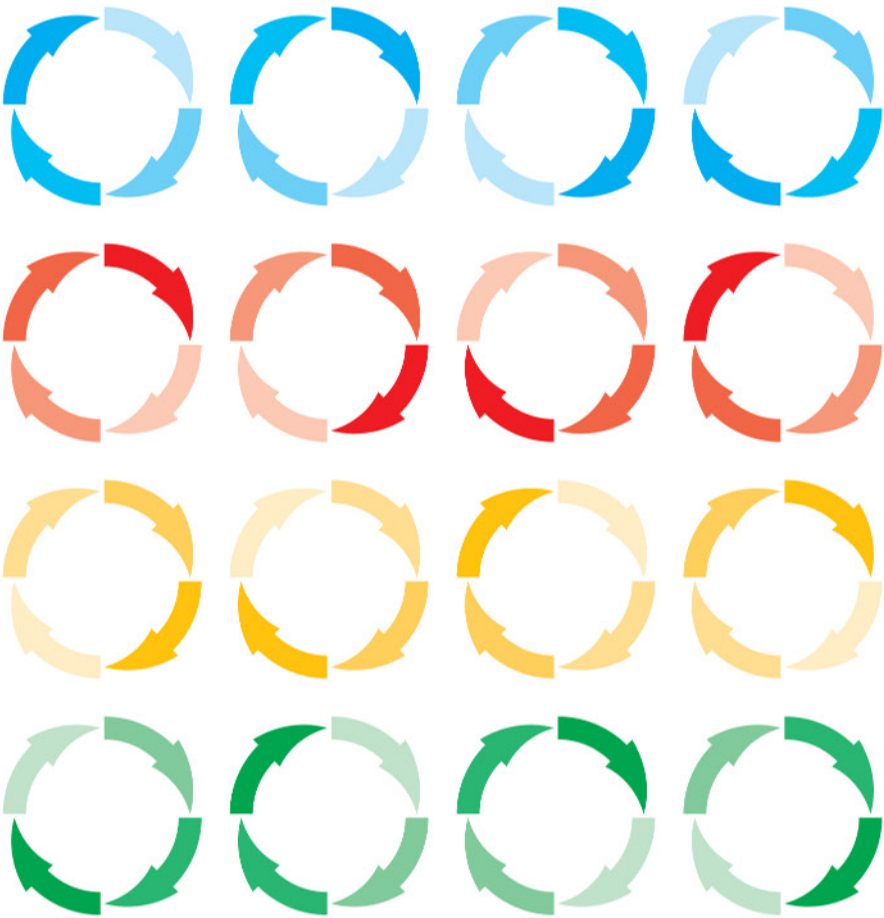
LEARNING FOR DEVELOPMENT

DEVELOPMENT **MATTERS**



HAZEL JOHNSON
AND GORDON WILSON

LEARNING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Development Matters

Development Matters is a series of comprehensive but concise introductions to the key issues in development studies. It offers politically engaged and challenging critiques while demonstrating academic and conceptual rigour to provide readers with critical, reflexive and challenging explorations of the pressing concerns in development. With carefully designed features, such as explanatory text boxes, glossaries and recommended reading, the series provides the reader with accessible guides to development studies.

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About the authors

Hazel Johnson is Professor of Development Policy and Practice at the Open University, UK.

Gordon Wilson is Senior Lecturer in Technology and Development at the Open University, UK.

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1 | Why Learning for Development?

This book in the *Development Matters* series takes a learning approach to development. The focus is on the everyday learning that takes place through development action, which may be intentional and structured as well as informal and an outcome of different forms of engagement. The social dynamics of learning are important for individuals, for their organizations and for building coherent policy and action. The connection between these processes is not straightforward – the organizational and institutional embedding of new learning is often one of the biggest challenges for development, and is a recurring theme throughout the book. This first chapter engages with the considerable scope of the field, and outlines our approach.

Conceptualizing a learning approach to development

Contemporary development theorist Jan Nederveen Pieterse defines development 'as the organized intervention in collective affairs according to a standard of improvement. What constitutes improvement and what is appropriate intervention obviously vary according to class, culture, historical context and relations of power' (2001: 3). This definition is purposive: development involves deliberate action to bring about positive changes for humanity. Nederveen Pieterse does signal, however, that both purpose and process are contested arenas.

The contested nature of defining development and of what

constitute 'organized intervention' and 'standard of improvement' is also present in the three views of development outlined by Thomas (2000). Starting with the notion of development as 'good change' put forward by Chambers (1997), Thomas notes first that development is a vision of a particular state of being. There are many visions of being, however, and such differences will be socially and culturally defined as well as changing over time and having different representations in different historical periods and parts of the world. Second, development is seen as a historical process: the dynamics of social, political and economic organization as they have changed over time – particularly, but not only, within capitalism. There are different analyses and interpretations of this historical process, and especially of the nature of capitalist development, with its historical links to colonialism and access to cheap inputs for industrialization from different parts of the world. Third, development is intentional activity: the interventions of different actors (state and non-state) deliberately taken to bring about what those actors consider to be 'good change'. Again, what is considered to be 'good change' will be informed by different understandings of development and will hence be supported by different policies and approaches to intervention.

There are obvious similarities between Nederveen Pieterse's 'organized intervention' and Thomas's intentional development, and his 'standard of improvement' is associated with a vision of a desirable state of being. However, development as a historical process is fundamental to the other two conceptions: by studying history, we gain a sense of why development has occurred in particular ways in different parts of the world – outcomes which include, of course, both the inexorable process of change in social, economic and political conditions, and the actions and interventions of those who wished deliberately to bring about change with the intention of improving well-being as a whole. Those actions, in history as in the present, have been informed by visions and perspectives about what constitutes development (even if 'development' was not the terminology used). Indeed it

has been suggested by Cowen and Shenton that development in its modern form was conceived in response to the negative effects of capitalism in the early nineteenth century, and that 'to develop . . . was to ameliorate the social misery which arose out of the immanent process of capitalist growth' (1996: 116). Since then, the main 'big debate' has been whether development should take place alongside capitalism or should envisage another social order. More recently, 'another social order' – in terms of its representation in socialism and communism – is seen as having failed, with some exceptions, such as in Cuba and China, although changes in those economies – particularly in China – have challenged their original Marxist visions. However, development alongside capitalism has also been judged by many as having failed the large majority of poor people (in spite of massive changes in South-East Asia and in the BRICS).[1] In the views of different structuralist and post-development thinkers, in particular, the development alongside capitalism 'project' is seen as the cause of the lack of development or underdevelopment in certain parts of the world (and as responsible for poverty and inequality within advanced capitalist societies).

Such contestations in terms of big ideas about the social order have been reflected in theoretical debates about development, whether in terms of grand theory about the nature of capitalist and socialist development, or with respect to middle-level theories of alternative and people-centred human development. Apart from currents of Marxism and post-development thinkers, most theorizing of development has been aligned to greater or lesser extents with policy and intervention within or alongside capitalism. Alternative development and human development thinkers have challenged capitalism in terms of its negative impacts and have argued for the need to focus on human needs, social and community development, human capabilities and democracy. Although it can be debated whether such ideas constitute the basis of a completely different social form, they have certainly challenged the neo-liberal currents and capitalist growth

orthodoxies of the 1980s. The theories of development that underlie the alternative and human development visions have also been closely linked in turn to approaches that promote participation, empowerment and capacity building, which have influenced major institutions such as the World Bank in their studies of the 'voices of the poor'.[2] As Thomas notes (2000: 20–1), even post-development thinkers have acknowledged the need for action, although with the strong caveat that interveners should 'start examining the whys and wherefores of their actions' (Rahnema, 1997: 397).

This book focuses on intentional development while arguing that the actions of interveners are fundamentally part of, and contribute to, development as history. Intentional development includes actors who may be considered as having 'trusteeship': 'the intent which is expressed, by one source of agency, to develop the capacities of another' (Cowen and Shenton, 1996: x). For example, our case studies include those working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), those in local government in North and South, and development managers who might be working in many types of organization. What legitimacy such trustees of development have, for whom, and for what are of course questions that need to be answered – rather more for NGOs and other development organizations, perhaps, than for democratically constituted local government. However, intentional development includes many forms of organization in the public sphere, such as social movements and campaigning organizations whose sources of legitimacy, types of trusteeship and purposes may be very different from those of entities such as NGOs and government institutions.

Because of the multiplicity of actors in development and of organizational forms, we prefer to use the term *development action* rather than intentional development. The concept of development action is akin to the notion of public action as discussed by Drèze and Sen (1989), Mackintosh (1992) and Wuyts (1992): 'purposive collective action, whether for collective private ends or for public ends' (Mackintosh, 1992: 5). It goes without saying that

development action, as public action, can be informed by many different visions, histories, contexts or interests, and can have a wide range of means at its disposal.

Acknowledging that development is potentially a struggle between conflicting analyses, interests and policies, we suggest that the post-development exhortation to examine the whys and wherefores of action is fundamental. We also argue that such an examination is key to learning through and for development action, without underestimating the challenge posed. For example, Nederveen Pieterse (2001) argues that development should be reflexive, that development thinking *is* reflexive by its very nature, and that the global changes of recent times compel us to adopt such an approach. Such changes include:

- new understandings of the dynamics of development – the importance of the 'software' (institutions, education and knowledge) as well as the 'hardware' (infrastructure and technology);
- the massive growth in actors in development, from the state to community organizations: 'development is no longer simply a mathematics of power and reshuffling the status quo' (*ibid.*: 157);
- an increase in the influence of Southern perspectives in development; and economic convergence, in particular the growth of the newly industrializing countries and the BRICS.

Such changes, Nederveen Pieterse argues, require us to redefine development 'as a collective learning experience' (*ibid.*: 159) involving collective reflexivity: 'a collective awareness that unfolds as part of a historical process of changing norms, ideologies and institutions' (*ibid.*: 163).

To these elements we would add an important dimension to collective learning: the information revolution and the enormous changes that information and communication technologies have made to connections between actors in different parts of the world. This in turn has underlined the role of knowledge in

development, extolled by the World Bank (1998), an emphasis that led to the creation of a 'Knowledge Bank'. However, the relationship between information and knowledge; how they are generated and shaped (and for what purpose); their links to global power relations and policy formation; and their role in learning – are all issues for debate. Samoff and Stromquist argue that 'distilled and digested bits of information disseminated through Internet websites risk perpetuating rather than reducing dependence. . . . What is needed is learning, largely initiated, maintained, managed, and sustained by those seeking to change their situation' (Samoff and Stromquist, 2001: 654).

In sharing such a perspective, we argue that a crucial dimension of development action is social engagement. But what kind of social engagement? For example, one emergent school of thought at the start of the new millennium has taken a critical perspective on the idea of 'participation', which has informed the theory and practice of much development action. An alternative idea of active or radical citizenship is proposed (Mohan and Hickey, 2004). However it is unrealistic to expect that there will be continual engagement of this kind (even though some forms of action will undoubtedly align themselves to social currents, campaigns and movements). The everyday dimensions of development action demand a socially aware and reflexive pragmatism as well as active citizenship, not least because much development action takes the form of defined projects, which are often short-term and circumscribed by funding agencies with particular interests. Their ubiquity leads us to refer to the 'projectization' of development action. However whether development action takes place through ongoing active citizenship and/or development projects (note that development projects could also be an expression of active citizenship), social engagement is likely to be characterized by conflicting perspectives, values and goals. For such social engagement to have longer-term and positive impact, reflexive learning, negotiation and accommodation are needed.

Even so, as Nederveen Pieterse points out, collective and

reflexive learning cannot assume that those in positions of power will engage to make the world a more equal place. Collective action is also needed (2001:163). Collective action can take many forms, from collaboration and cooperation across apparently conflicting or disparate interests, to campaigning for fundamental social change. Collective action can create the space for collective learning. Collective learning in turn requires acknowledging and validating difference, and, as we will see from case studies in this book, establishing trust (Chapter 4). It may be difficult or even impossible to build trust in contexts of inequality and unequal power. Nevertheless, learning can also take place through conflict (Chapter 3), as well as through making mistakes (Chapters 3, 4 and 6; see also Chambers, 1997).

Learning for development has had many points of focus – outlined in what follows as we preview the contents of this book.

The scope of learning for development

Historically, much of the literature on learning in and for development has examined learning as part of immanent development, or development as a historical process. This focus particularly applies to analyses of industrialization, about which there is a substantial literature on technology transfer, technological learning and learning from the experience of others. This literature often focuses on models of development (for example, East Asian models), and whether such models are replicable in other parts of the world.

Building models is one way of sharing and communicating learning. There are, however, different ways of conceptualizing models. One way is as a blueprint that might suggest how something can be done. There is a tendency to be sceptical about blueprints because success and failure may be highly dependent on the particular features of a given context. However blueprints can also be useful in very similar situations. On the other hand, using models as points of comparison rather than replication is a useful

learning tool to inform policy and action. Using models for learning can be a powerful mechanism to decide what to change, adapt or use directly – as well as what not to do. Such processes have been strongly advocated by more systemic and holistic views of how learning takes place and how it can be sustained over time (Korten, 1992; Rondinelli, 1993; Clark *et al.*, 2003).

One blueprint that has pervaded development projects (as opposed to other kinds of development action) relates to one of the tools and techniques of development that is presumed to promote learning. This is 'project cycle management', which involves identifying needs and objectives, planning and implementation, and assessment of outcomes. Learning is expected to take place (through monitoring and evaluation) throughout the cycle; it is assumed that the process will adjust to new events or changes in context, as well as gaining from past experience. A particular tool in project cycle management is 'logical framework analysis' (or LFA), which provides a matrix for relating a hierarchy of activities to overall goals with measures and indicators of success. During this process the assumptions underlying the activities and goals are made explicit. LFA is deemed to have learning embedded within it, as actors can evaluate their performance against their progress through the logical framework. The underlying assumptions are crucially important, as they may determine whether outcomes are achieved or not; checking out assumptions is thus a very important part of the learning process.

Such approaches have also been subject to criticism. One criticism of LFA is its overriding concern with accountability, reflecting an audit culture that seeks to reduce uncertainty to measurable goals. As Gasper notes, such processes are limited in usefulness when there are unintended effects, when interactions are complex, and if there are major differences between stakeholders (2000: 27). Other writers concur. For example, Biggs and Smith (2003) argue that project cycle management, assumed to promote learning, has taken primacy over organizational settings and cultures and usurped the place of human agency, which can

fundamentally influence development programmes and projects. Indeed, Clark *et al*. would argue that individual actors, even more than organizations, can have a catalytic influence over the outcomes of development action (2003: 1859).

Alternative approaches, developed by the International Development Research Centre in Canada (IDRC), have focused on 'outcome mapping' in response to the perceived rigidities of logical framework analysis. IDRC notes:

> LFA takes a 'mechanistic' view focusing on the 'ballistic' term 'impact' which implies a discrete, measurable, predictable and straightforward relationship between a programme and the change it wishes to make, whereas OM [outcome mapping] sees development as characterized by long-term, open problems, and recognizes that social change is complex and requires change in many actors over a long period of time. Following from this, LFA assumes that the results development programmes aim for are fully within their control, whereas OM is based on an understanding that agencies can only influence and contribute to development outcomes. (IDRC, 2007: 7)

Such reflections, particularly those about organizational and cultural settings and the role of human agency, take us back to social engagement and active citizenship as points of learning. To put this in context, there is debate over whether interveners (for example, professionals working in development) are perpetuating a neo-colonial form of development administration, or whether they are providing avenues for new kinds of approaches and engagement (Cooke, 2003; Kothari, 2005) – something that we pick up on at different points in this book. There is no easy answer to this question. On one hand, development professionals work within the paradigms and accepted wisdom of their own social settings, even though they may seek to gain awareness of other social settings and to act in a reflexive way – that is, being conscious of and reflecting on their own actions. On the other hand, development professionals also work within powerful institutional and organizational agendas that may be difficult to contest