Call for Papers: How to Change the World. Entangled Histories of Development

Conference: 26-28 May, 2017
Shanghai University, Shanghai
Organized by College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, and Graduate Institute, Geneva.

Call for Papers

Large part of international policies during the last two hundred years – at least – have been influenced by the idea of “development.” Though the term became an important part of the international discourse only after 1945, the concept is clearly older, rooted in the idea that socio-economic conditions would and should improve and that specific policies should be employed to bring about such improvements. Beyond this core, “development” has been a highly contested concept, whose constructed character has repeatedly been pointed out.

Critics such as Arturo Escobar or Gilbert Rist have denounced it as essentially an imperialist policy by high-income countries. They point to international structures created in the name of “development” which have often reflected power inequalities and served the interests of those that put them in place. They also call attention to the continuing enormous economic inequalities between people in different parts of the world despite - or because of? - decades of “development” efforts allegedly designed to mitigate such disparity. Meanwhile, other scholars like Richard Jolly and Charles Kenny identify perceived successes of “development,” measured in social indicators such as life expectancy, infant mortality, gender equality or literacy, which contradict a simplistic notion of continued failure. These differences of perspectives are compounded by the fact that interpretations of what exactly constitutes “development” abound. A Western concept of modernization usually entailed a combination of mechanization, urbanization, secularization, a shift towards individualism, a growing provision with material goods and life at an accelerating pace. But the perceived shortcomings of this approach have given rise to a series of alternative concepts, including the basic needs approach, Amartya Sen’s view of “development as freedom” or Herman Daly’s insistence on “development” as a strictly qualitative notion, to be distinguished from economic growth. The 1980s saw the emergence of “sustainable development,” designed to reconcile arguably irreconcilable economic, environmental and social components of development and, more recently, Southern concepts such as “Buen Vivir” or “Ubuntu” have been added to the list of alternative concepts about how and where to societies should direct their evolution, each with its own package of contested meanings.
Despite this lack of precision, “development” continues to play an important role in public rhetoric. International organizations continue to employ categories such as “developed” or “least developed” countries, and for many people, particularly in low-income countries, “development” remains a powerful and seemingly self-evident goal. Clearly, for all its vagueness, the term has been considered useful in communication both about international policies and about desired or actual changes in a given society. In a larger sense, the idea of some form of socio-economic improvement as a goal of public or private actions seems to have resonated with societies in many parts of the world, though not necessarily with similar meanings or goals. Inevitably, as concepts and policies traveled, they underwent transformations, often in unsuspected or contradictory ways, and perspectives of what constituted “successes” or “failures” often evolved along with changing attitudes in public and in academia. Besides, a full analysis of development is complicated by different, sometimes contradictory repercussions over time and space. For instance, the adoption of fossil fuels, by replacing wood and manual labor, may have contributed to reforestation in some regions, to the end of slavery in others and to the endorsement of ethics of human equality (almost) everywhere. Only decades later did their potentially disastrous role in climate change become visible, whose precise effects are still unclear but will be profound, long-lasting and regionally different.

Meeting thirty years after the publication of Our Common Future, this conference seeks to explore various concepts and practices of “development” between roughly the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries from a world history perspective, looking at the ways in which they entangled histories of different times and different places. As pivotal sectors in which developmental practices have become effective, contributions addressing economic, health and/or environmental aspects and their interaction are particularly welcome.

Papers are invited on topics related to this general framework. Questions of particular interest include but are not limited to the following aspects:

- The actors of development, including governments, social movements, individuals, organizations and others;
- The various concepts of development and ways in which they changed through adaptation to evolving circumstances or new ideas, through hybridization and/or through selective adoption;
- The practices of development, including industrialization, collectivization, mise en valeur, development assistance programs etc.;
- The role of knowledge in development debates, including relevant input of science and technology;
- Apparent winners or losers of developmental processes, including trade-offs between different effects.

Accommodation and meals in Shanghai will be covered. Limited travel assistance may be available for some participants upon application.

A subsequent publication of selected contributions is planned.

Time-table:
1 Nov 2016: submission of abstracts
1 Dec 2016: notification about acceptance
1 May 2017: submission of papers

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