

## Development Narratives: Recent Trends and Future Needs

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The Commission for Africa and the Gleneagles summit thrust development into the political spotlight and the public consciousness. These events and others in 2005 inspired authors to write their versions of why some countries are not growing and what the rich countries should be doing to help them. Paul Collier's *The Bottom Billion* is the latest of these development narratives and it has great strengths – moving beyond aid, clarity in setting priorities for the poorest countries, realpolitik considerations – and some deep flaws – the assumption that traps are automatically overcome in an economy with a growing GDP, an over-reliance on cross-country regressions, and a failure to reach beyond economics. But comparing such narratives reveals their near-universal Western-centric positions. The challenge now is for new metanarratives to emerge.

### Comparing development narratives

High profile narratives published before Collier's include those by: Jeffrey Sachs – a 'planner' – with his 'big push' ideas piloted in the Millennium Villages (2005); William Easterly's sobering yet extreme critique of the 'planners' and his paean to the 'searchers' who support home grown solutions (2006); Joseph Stiglitz's seemingly utopian soundings on how to make globalisation work for the poor (2006); and Ha-Joon Chang's reminders that donor prescriptions for development in the 21st century are very different from the paths they themselves took two centuries before (2007). Wolfgang Sachs' narrative – a less

obvious comparator – is also included in this analysis (2007). He views future interactions of development and climate as being about how little the North can take in natural resources, rather than about how much the North gives the South.

The key messages from the narratives are essentially straightforward, but also include nuanced reasoning. The implications for development policy are crystal clear in some cases (Jeffrey Sachs) and opaque in others (Easterly gives us conditional cash transfers but not too much else). The critiques depend on what your own biases are and on who you read. Easterly and Chang seem to have evoked the strongest reactions.

Hardly anyone has noticed Wolfgang Sachs' narrative connecting poverty alleviation and 'wealth' alleviation, which is a pity. These narratives are often cast against each other in a zero-sum frame, when in reality they can add to each other's value. They are often taken as blueprints, and with the possible exception of Jeffrey Sachs', none are. The narratives are summarised in Table 1 overleaf.

But the more I reviewed the six narratives, the less dissimilar they seemed. None was from outside the West (with the partial exception of Chang). None located themselves in a wider epistemological context. They did not challenge basic assumptions – the

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Table 1: Contours of Six Narratives on Development

Author and narrative	Key conclusions and implications for development aid	Key critiques
<b>Collier, P.</b> <i>The Bottom Billion</i>	Focus on those living in countries where the potential for growth is trapped. Engage a broader sweep of instruments beyond aid.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simply a ‘new range of treatments for different diseases’ – assumes a functioning organism in the first place according to Clemens (2007)</li> <li>• Not the implied third way between J. Sachs and Easterly, more an amalgam</li> <li>• What about the millions trapped within China and India?</li> <li>• Collier-only research, much of it cross-country regressions</li> </ul>
<b>Sachs, J.</b> <i>The End of Poverty</i>	Development aid should be large, focused, and integrated. Governance and institutions will develop as growth occurs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overly technocratic</li> <li>• Assumes too much about transferability of technology</li> <li>• Throwback to the 1950s and 1960s</li> <li>• Too sanguine about evolution of good governance mechanisms</li> </ul>
<b>Easterly, W.</b> <i>The White Man’s Burden</i>	Weak accountability means that the interventions of top-down planners tend to fail. Be humble. Look for opportunities to support home-grown initiatives. Be better at listening in-country. Support real accountability – for yourselves and for others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overdoes the critique of the planners – ‘the right plan is to have no plan’</li> <li>• Simplifies too much</li> <li>• Caricature of multilateral organisations</li> </ul>
<b>Sachs, W.</b> <i>Global Challenges: Climate Chaos and the Future of Development</i>	Climate change signals the biophysical limits of growth. Link Northern domestic and Northern development efforts much more closely. There needs to be a convergence in resource use per unit of growth – in North and South. Northern countries have to be prepared to act unilaterally on climate change if necessary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have seen the limits of growth arguments before – why are they compelling now?</li> <li>• The North will never reduce wealth and consumption</li> </ul>
<b>Chang, H-J.</b> <i>Bad Samaritans</i>	Rich countries want poor countries to do as they say, not as they did. Poor countries need selective, strategic integration with world economy. Tilt the playing field in favour of developing countries. Give them freer access to open markets and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 19th century protectionist model does not apply to 21st century Africa</li> <li>• Not enough of a recommendation on exactly what to do</li> <li>• Infant industry promotion more important than protection (Chang does not advocate either in a one-size-fits-all way)</li> </ul>
<b>Stiglitz, J.</b> <i>Making Globalization Work</i>	Fulfil G8 commitments; fairer trade; more open IPR; developed country leadership on climate change; more responsible governance in North of financial services, arms, narcotics. Be more supportive of civil society to put more pressure on developed and developing countries to make globalisation more inclusive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much faith placed in powerful countries’ desires to change global governance and too much faith in the impacts of it if they did</li> <li>• Good analysis, but solutions are utopian, and he provides little information on how to move forwards</li> </ul>

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striving for change, the definition of progress in material terms (although Wolfgang Sachs' comes closest), the importance of liberal democracy and the potentially key supportive role of outsiders. They seemed, in short, to be arguing over an important, but second order set of issues.

### A development metanarrative

I believe there is a metanarrative which is at the root of all these narratives. It is described (and critiqued) by Walter Russell Mead (2007) as the 'Whig narrative' – 'a distinctively Anglo-American concept of history told as the story of a slow sure and irresistible capitalist progress under the guidance of the invisible hand' which reflects 'God's order' whether revealed through Newton, Darwin or Smith. The various narratives are either comfortably nestled within the metanarrative or represent a strong reaction to it. The metanarrative argues that:

- Anglo-American culture is essentially restless and activist and sees its role as trying to change the world. Jeffrey Sachs' narrative is firmly within this tradition.
- The gap between the norms inherent in capitalism (e.g. creative destruction) and local norms is small. Easterly's narrative about planners and searchers argues that in many developing country contexts this gap is large, but he runs out of steam in trying to tell us how it might be bridged, probably because his

story is written from inside the tradition of the metanarrative.

- Growth and freedom are universal goals. But in particular contexts people often do not agree on what those goals mean. Collier's argument that the Millennium Development Goals give equal weight to struggles against poverty in countries that are growing versus those where there is little hope of overcoming traps suggests a dissatisfaction with the universal view, but is not a head-on challenge to it.
- When large parts of the world adopt capitalism, this creates opportunities for neighbours. But as Mead notes, their neighbours run the risk of becoming poorer if they do not follow. Wolfgang Sachs' narrative about major environment externalities highlights the weakness of this part of the 'Whig narrative'.
- The industrialised countries developed fairly quickly, and the developing world should be able to now. But 300 years of Anglo-American capitalism, has given many developing countries less attractive options than those the Anglo-Americans had when they were developing. This is essentially the Chang narrative.
- The predominant human drive is for development and growth. But there are other needs – the need for continuity and particularity – and effective institutions are needed to avoid conflict. One of Collier's strong contributions is to highlight the

importance of conflict as a contributor to, and an outcome of, poverty.

- Rationalism is a sufficiently strong basis on which to define global rules. But there are other strong tendencies (religion and tradition) so it is difficult to try to base global rules and institutions on purely rational approaches as implied by Stiglitz. Such a set of rules need to be based on a more diverse and less uniform set of views if they are to be widely accepted.

By way of contrast, the 46 roundtable discussions about development challenges that IDS co-organised across the world in 2006 didn't reflect a metanarrative and generated very particular answers in each location. There was in fact a deep sense that the space for different development trajectories was expanding (Haddad and Knowles 2007). Whatever the reason – fuelled perhaps by China's success, perhaps by the failures of structural adjustment, or perhaps by donor language and action around ownership and direct budget support – people sensed less of a one-size-fits-all orthodoxy in the development discourse, and if they did come across it, they felt less bound by it. In short there was a new freedom to discuss a family of development stories.

### Other narratives needed

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metanarrative. This involves a huge effort to illuminate voices, knowledge and narratives from all over the globe and develop mechanisms for the co-construction of that knowledge. There are surely more relevant, more realistic, and more nationally identified narratives to come from within the countries that until recently (e.g. China, Brazil, India) or still are (e.g. Bangladesh, Ghana, Uganda) the focus of most development efforts.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is one of the best examples of the kinds of globally constructed knowledge needed to underpin global action in areas such as climate, arms and trade. It draws on partial pictures to develop a more complete panorama. Such a 360 degree perspective is truly hard to generate, but dominant partial views will no longer be helpful in a world that is so interdependent.

## Further Reading

- Clemens, M.A.** (2007) 'Smart Samaritans,' *Foreign Affairs* 86.5
- Collier, P.** (2007) *The Bottom Billion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
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- Haddad, L. and Knowles, C.** (eds) (2007) 'Reinventing Development Research', *IDS Bulletin* 38.2
- Sachs, J.** (2005) *The End of Poverty*, London: Penguin Press
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- Stiglitz, J.** (2006) *Making Globalization Work*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company

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