



RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT

A Personal Reflection

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Four years ago, after COVID shutdowns, I decided to change my career.

The fancy cars, skyscrapers, and luxurious things felt meaningless as I could only see them from my window. Sitting there, I realized how little they mattered amid life's uncertainties. I never expected life to normalize. From that window, I decided if given a second chance, I would use it differently—by pursuing a more meaningful career in a field I truly cared about.

That is how I joined international development studies, hoping to help create a more just and equitable world—not one measured only by material wealth but by what truly matters.

Today, I find myself as the last student taking the international development studies course at my university. The program is shutting down not just here, but also in many other universities around the world. **How can such an important program disappear?**

Perhaps there is something deeper behind it than just budget cuts. Perhaps many students, like me, have experienced a sense of fatigue, a feeling that development has not fully lived up to its presumed promises. I acknowledge and appreciate the meaningful and incredible work that has been done in this field; however, there are also many flaws in how development has been defined and practiced.

Growing up, development was not a strange word to me. It was ingrained in every part of my life. **The phrase “developing world” followed me everywhere.** My first real encounter with the phrase was in school. To me, it sounded like a promise or a journey.

This journey, however, came with clear instructions. My role was to wait, to receive, and to follow. Development felt like something poured into an empty vessel, with a constant reminder that it is a necessity. It came with a long list of steps you “must” take to “arrive”.

I had no say in what this development meant or how to shape it. The idea was already defined. It felt like there was a beautifully designed place called Developed, and my task was to get there by following all the prescribed steps. Education was one of the main steps, and it was mainly presented as receiving, not questioning.

The journey felt tedious and **I began to wonder: Who defines development? Who decides when it has been achieved? Who holds the measuring tape?** Unfortunately, the answers were never mine to give.

When I later encountered development in the formal and academic sector, this reality became even clearer. It was more complex than I had imagined. I was introduced to terms like grant proposals, community programs, reports, and most importantly, the ultimate development tool: “the project”.



Projects have formulas, deadlines, outputs, and deliverables. Success is measured in numbers, timelines, and checklists. It all seemed very organized but yet, strangely distant from the transformation it promises.

The more I engaged with the development sector, the more I became aware of its uncomfortable truths. At times, development begins to feel like an industry rather than a mission of transformation. There are projects to design, budgets to meet, reports to submit, and success often measured by ticking boxes rather than changing lives.

This does not mean there has been no progress. But it does raise a hard question: **if development was meant to bring deep, lasting change, why do so many communities still face the same struggles decades later?**

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the blueprint itself, the way development was designed from the beginning. The system assumed a one-directional flow of knowledge and solutions. It relied on pre-set definitions of progress.

When the foundation of a house is weak, even the strongest walls will crack. In the same way, if our understanding of development is flawed, no matter how well-funded or well-intentioned our projects are, they will fall short.

I acknowledge that there have been important shifts in the sector. The language is evolving and that matters because language shapes perception. Organizations and individuals are doing incredible work that changes lives in real and tangible ways.

But acknowledging progress should not stop us from asking the more complex questions. How do we define development today? Who gets to define it? And how does that definition shape the projects we design, the goals we set, and the impact we celebrate?

If development is about creating a better world, then we need to ask: Better for whom? And by whose standards? Perhaps the real work is not just in designing projects but in reimagining the very foundation of what we call development. Because the way we define something will always influence the way we pursue it.

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