

The Post-Development Agenda

Paths to a Pluriverse of Convivial Futures

Federico Demaria, Ashish Kothari

1. Transformative Alternatives to Development to Envision Convivial Futures

2022 marks the 30th anniversary of *The Development Dictionary* edited by Wolfgang Sachs (1992). While the *Dictionary* might have fallen short of its intention to write the obituary of development, it did send shockwaves through the activist, policy, and scholarly worlds and became an influential text. The relevance and impact of Sachs' book is still felt today. At the same time, there is no dearth of newly revitalized hegemonic notions, with the *amoeba concept* (meaning its high malleability) of sustainable development still being floated and indeed given new life by the global intergovernmental agreement on Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (United Nations 2015). It was in this context that we published *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Kothari et al. 2019), which, while emulating the spirit of the original *Dictionary*, brings both reincarnated worldviews and fresh alternatives to the notion of 'development' sharply into view. The starting point is the need to go beyond critique and concentrate efforts that articulate the narratives of those struggling to retain or create diverse ways of life against the homogenizing forces of development. There is a need for radical post-development practices, ideas, and worldviews to become an agenda for activists, policymakers, and scholars to help in truly *transforming our world* and therefore offer an alternative to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The descriptor *post-development* is generally meant as an era or approach in which development is no longer the central organizing principle of social life. Even as critiques of development increase in academic spaces, they are arising with equal power amongst indigenous peoples, local communities, women's rights movements, and other civil-society actors—most prominently amongst the victims of development. Across the world, this is resulting in the resurfacing of ancient worldviews with fresh relevance or in new frameworks and visions that present systemic alternatives for human and planetary wellbeing. It is also forcing the decolonization of knowledge systems and epistemologies, breaking down many of the dualisms that Western patriarchal paradigms have engendered, such as between humans and nature.

Post-development is related to at least four other emerging imaginaries, that of post-capitalism (questioning capitalism's ability or attempt to fully and naturally occupy the economy, with the concomitant visualization of an array of diverse and alternative economic practices), post- or degrowth (decentering growth from the definition of both the economy and social life), post-patriarchy (challenging the primacy of masculinist approaches to political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and the control of property), and post-colonialism (the critical study of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands). The current mood is "to search for alternatives in a deeper sense, that is, aiming to break away from the cultural and ideological bases of development, bringing forth other imaginaries, goals, and practices" (Gudynas/Acosta 2011: 75; our translation).

Therefore, we argue that the time is ripe to deepen and widen a research, dialogue, and action agenda on a variety of worldviews and practices relating to our collective search for an ecologically wise and socially just world. These should be transformative alternatives to the currently dominant processes of globalized development, including its structural roots in modernity, capitalism, state domination, patriarchy, and more specific phenomena, such as casteism, which are still found in many parts of the world. Plus, they should go beyond the superficial or false solutions that those in power are proposing in an

attempt to ‘greenwash’ development, including variants of the ‘green economy,’ market remedies, and technofixes. The post-development agenda should investigate the what, how, who, and why of all that is transformative, and what and who is not. Equally, though, proponents of post-development need to overcome a number of weaknesses in their narrative, acknowledge that development as an idea has not been buried, and sharpen their focus on the structural changes needed to deal with issues of inequity, injustice, deprivation, and ecological collapse (Ziai 2015).

The exploration of alternatives to development already finds concrete expression in a panoply of new or re-emerging concepts and practices such as *buen vivir*, convivialism, degrowth, ecological *swaraj*, radical feminisms of various kinds, *ubuntu*, commoning, solidarity economy, and food and energy sovereignty (Kothari/Demaria/Acosta 2014). These are perhaps the most visible examples of an emergent post-developmental epistemic-political field towards a pluriverse. These radical alternatives are becoming not only more visible but, increasingly, genuinely credible and viable. And yet they are still marginal in comparison to the dominant narrative and practice of development. Thus, it seems a good moment to make such alternatives more widely known and to facilitate bridges among them while respecting their geopolitical and epistemic specificities. It is also critical to build bridges between constructive alternatives and peoples’ movements that are resisting the dominant economic and political systems (Kothari et al. 2019; see also *Global Tapestry of Alternatives* 2021).

2. Critique of Development and Origins of Alternative Worldviews

A range of different and complementary notions or worldviews have emerged in various regions of the world that seek to envision and achieve more fundamental transformation than that proposed by sustainable development approaches. Some of these are a revival of the long-standing worldviews of indigenous peoples; still others have

emerged from recent social and environmental movements in relation to old traditions and philosophies. Arising as they do from different cultural and social contexts, they sometimes differ on their prescriptions (what shall be done and how) but they share the main characteristics of the diagnosis (what is the problem and who is responsible for it) as well as similar or equivalent *Weltanschauungen* (“worldviews”).

Unlike sustainable development, which is a concept based on an assumed or forced consensus, these alternative approaches cannot be reduced to any single one and therefore do not aspire to be adopted as a common goal by the United Nations, the OECD, or the African Union. These ideas have been born as proposals for radical change from the local to the global level. Under post-political conditions, they intend to repoliticize the debate on the much-needed socio-ecological transformation, thereby affirming dissent with the current world representations and searching for alternative ones. Along these lines, they are a critique of the current development hegemony, which means they are a critique of the homogenization of cultures as a result of the widespread adoption of particular technologies and consumption and production models experienced in the Global North (Escobar 1995). The Western development model is a mental construct adopted by the rest of the world that needs to be deconstructed. Development might thus be seen as a toxic term to be rejected and thus ‘sustainable development’ as an oxymoron.

Deconstructing development opens the door for a multiplicity of new and old notions and worldviews or a matrix of alternatives (Lattouche 2009). This includes *buen vivir*, a way of life with different names and varieties in various regions of South America; *ubuntu*, with its emphasis on human mutuality in South Africa and several equivalents in other parts of Africa; *swaraj*, which has a focus on self-reliance and self-governance, in India; and many others. What is important is that, while these worldviews are ancient, they are re-emerging in their original or modified forms as a part of the narrative of movements that are struggling against development and/or asserting alternative forms of well-being. Ecofeminist arguments represent a further strand in this post-development rainbow (Salleh 1997).

These worldviews are part of a long search for and practice of alternative ways of living forged in the furnace of humanity's struggle for emancipation and enlightenment *within* (rather than outside of) the womb of nature. What is remarkable about these alternative proposals, however, is that they often arise from traditionally marginalized groups. These worldviews are different from dominant Western ones as they emerge from non-capitalist communities or from non-capitalist spaces such as the household sector in the Global North. They are therefore independent of the anthropocentric and androcentric logic of capitalism, the dominant civilization, as well as with the various state socialist (effectively state capitalist) models that have existed until now. Other approaches emerging from within the industrialized countries—the belly of the beast, so to speak—can also break from dominant logic, such as is the case with degrowth, an example of a non-occidental West (Demaria et al. 2013; D'Alisa/Demaria/Kallis 2014; Kallis et al. 2020).

These worldviews differ sharply from today's notion of development. It is not about applying a set of policies, instruments, and indicators to exit 'underdevelopment' and reach that desired condition of 'development.' In any case, how many countries have actually achieved development? Decades after the notion of 'development' spread around the world, only a handful of countries can be called 'developed,' others are struggling to emulate them, and all are doing this at enormous ecological and social costs. The problem is not in the lack of implementation but rather in the concept of development as linear, unidirectional material and financial growth. And if 'development' is seen in its original meaning of the opening up of opportunities and horizons, then what the world is experiencing is widespread 'bad development,' including in those countries regarded as industrialized (e.g., countries whose lifestyle was to serve as a benchmark for backward countries). The functioning of the global system is itself a 'bad developer.'

In short, it is urgent to abandon the conventional concept of progress in its productivist drift and of development (as well as its many synonyms) as a unidirectional concept, especially in its mechanis-

tic view of economic growth. However, it is not only about discarding these. Different views are required, much richer in content as well as in complexity. As Kallis (2015) explains:

“Sustainable development and its more recent reincarnation ‘green growth’ depoliticize genuine political antagonisms between alternative visions for the future. They render environmental problems technical, promising win–win solutions and the impossible goal of perpetuating economic growth without harming the environment.”

Therefore, these alternative approaches are necessary to challenge the ideas of sustainable development and the associated belief in economic growth as a desirable path in political agendas. They are also important in presenting to us a set of ethical values and principles that underlie positive, transformative action, such as diversity, solidarity, commons, oneness with nature, interconnectedness, simplicity, inclusiveness, equity and non-hierarchy, pluriversality, and peace.

3. Towards a Pluriverse of Convivial Futures

At a time when neoliberal governments and rampant extractivism brutalize the everyday life of citizens around the world and in particular the Global South, it is crucial that oppositional voices and people’s movements engage in a concentrated effort of research, outreach, dialogue, and action, informed by and informing grassroots practice. Resistance is crucial but it is not enough. We need our own narratives. Acts of resistance and regeneration offer hope in the here and now.

The future post-development agenda must expand the inventory of the pluriverse, advance the definition of what the transformative alternatives are, show how they differ from flawed solutions, and also explore how they can be articulated. From this perspective, a future agenda shall address the following questions:

- What do the alternatives to development have in common and how are they different?

- What potential exists for tensions and complementarities, given that the socio-ecological communities from which these alternatives emerge are rooted in specific territories and cultural contexts?
- How could these alternatives to development converge and cross-fertilize while also retaining their identity and uniqueness?
- How can we deal with those worlds that do not want to relate with others, for example, the ethno-nationalist and imperializing worlds, without going against the principles of the pluriverse? Is it possible to do so without resorting to universal criteria (pluriversity versus universality)?
- Faced with global problems and ideologies (such as the discipline of economics), is it necessary to put forward global visions that relativize a whole series of anthropological, social, political, and economic visions and ideas that are considered universal? How could the exploration of this pluriverse of alternatives to development, characterized by varying degrees of radicality and success, contribute to transcending the dominant and globalized sociocultural paradigm of industrial civilization?

This also entails empirical explorations of what we can learn from concrete experiences that make up the past, present, and future of the pluriverse (Kaul et al. forthcoming). These include:

- The study of territorial experiences such as Rojava, Chiapas, Cuba, Bhutan, indigenous societies, and any other relevant initiatives;
- historical territorial experiences and exilic spaces, that is, those areas of social and economic life in which people try to escape from capitalist relations and processes, either territorially or by trying to build structures and practices that are autonomous from capitalist accumulation and social control (e.g., Zomia, Maroons, Makhnovia);
- municipal or radical democracy alternatives (e.g., Marinaleda, Mendha Lekha, Longo Maĩ, Christiania) and ethnographic studies of experiences of solidarity economies and intentional communities;

- various conceptions of a *good life* as a basis for building concrete alternatives (e.g., *buen vivir*, *minobimaatisiwin*, *bamtaare*, *tri hita karana*, *shohoj*, *kyosei*, *sentipensar*);
- post-growth and wellness policy initiatives (e.g., New Zealand, Wales, Scotland);
- evaluation of alternatives from a variety of perspectives (ecological, gender, economic, democratic, cultural); and
- how to deal with the problems of differentiated populations (with different interests) and the risk of essentializing the ‘cultural alternatives’?

These are just some of the open questions that need attention if we want to move forward convivial futures that rely on pluriversal visions of co-existence beyond neoliberal agendas (Convivialist International 2020).

4. Beyond the One World of the United Nations and Towards “A World Where Many Worlds Fit” of the Zapatistas

This chapter has attempted to briefly lay out both the critique of (sustainable) development as well as the potential and nuances of a post-development agenda. *The Post-Development Agenda* is meant to deepen and widen a research, dialogue, and action agenda for activists, policymakers, and scholars on a variety of worldviews and practices relating to our collective search for an ecologically wise and socially just world. Very similar to the main ideas of convivialism, these are meant to be truly transformative and may be distinguished from false solutions in a number of ways: first, in their attempts to transform the structural roots of a problem along political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological axes; second, in their explicit or implicit questioning of the core assumptions of the development discourse (e.g., growth, material progress, instrumental rationality, the centrality of markets and economy, universality, modernity) and its binaries; and third, in encompass-

ing a radically different set of ethics and values to those that underpin the current system.

In conclusion, these alternatives to development practices and worldviews intend to repoliticize the debate on the much-needed socio-ecological transformation, thereby affirming their dissent with the current world representations (e.g., sustainable development) and searching for alternative ones. They highlight the need to overcome the modern ontology of one world and expand on the multiplicity of possible worlds. As Escobar (2011: 139) argues:

“The modern ontology presumes the existence of One World—a universe. This assumption is undermined by discussions in TDs [transition discourses], the *buen vivir*, and the rights of Nature. In emphasizing the profound relationality of all life, these newer tendencies show that there are indeed relational worldviews or ontologies for which the world is always multiple—a pluriverse. Relational ontologies are those that eschew the divisions between nature and culture, individual and community, and between us and them that are central to the modern ontology. Some of today’s struggles could be seen as reflecting the defense and activation of relational communities and worldviews [...] and as such they could be read as *ontological struggles*; they refer to *a different way of imagining life*, to another mode of existence. They point towards the pluriverse; in the successful formula of the Zapatista, the pluriverse can be described as ‘a world where many worlds fit.’”

From here we could start envisioning to articulate those values that could guide our coexistence on this planet “enunciating them in the most general (and therefore shareable) terms possible, ending up expressing them in both particular and plural forms” (Convivialist International 2020: 11).

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