

# Development or Democracy: The Debate

*Economic development, democracy and human rights have again entered the political debate in, however, a new context. Western development assistance to the Third World and to the ex-Socialist Bloc countries is now becoming conditional to commitments from aid-receiving regimes to democratic reforms. Improvement of human rights conditions in aid recipient countries is a major concern of the donor community. Amazingly enough, the World Bank too has joined the reform club. 'Good governance' is now posited as an essential key to economic development.*

*Some Third World leaders have not taken too kindly to what they term as the neo-imperialist attitude of rich Western countries to the developing world. Particularly sensitive is the issue of human rights. Governments in China, India, Malaysia and to a lesser extent in Sri Lanka have sharply reacted to the linking of human rights to development assistance. Their opposition is based on two grounds. Firstly, human rights is an internal issue in which outsiders should not interfere. Secondly, poor countries, with the majority of their populations with empty stomachs, cannot afford to postpone the goal of development for the sake of an abstract notion of human rights.*

*Who is right in this debate? Both sides are wrong on some fundamental issues concerning development, democracy and human rights in our part of the world.*

*We publish below two essays on this controversial theme. Professor Paul Sieghart's essay is written from the perspectives of the people who are the subject of both development and democracy. Although written some nine years ago, its analysis is eminently valid for today.*

*In the second essay, Sunil Bastian, development researcher and human rights activist, looks into the challenges that the human rights community is faced with in the context of the development-democracy-human rights linkage.*

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## Economic Development, Human Rights and the Omelette Thesis

Paul Sieghart

In a little more than a decade, development economics has become an established academic discipline. Among the social sciences, it now manifests one of the highest growth rates, and the demand for it shows no sign of any imminent downturn. As emergent nations adopt and adapt their development strategies, a veritable intellectual industry has come into being around them. But among the welter of material that the industry produces, there is a real danger that we may lose sight of what it is all for - that we may become so hypnotised by the glittering concept of 'development' and all that surrounds it that we forget that it can never be more than a means to an end: the well-being, the achievement of the potential, and the realisation of the legitimate aspirations of *people*, that is, the diverse myriads of individual and unique men, women and children who continue to suffer, avoidably, through unnecessary deprivation. Regrettably, there is still far less disciplined learning about the ends of development than about the means. In the area of ends, the language of discourse is still too often loose, value-laden and unspecific. Perhaps that is one reason why those trained in the precision of science - including development economists - tend to avoid it. Yet its problems must be faced, for unless the ends can be clearly understood and specified the means will not only lack direction, but all too easily be perverted for self-interested and pernicious purposes.

The ends of development can today be most usefully discussed in terms of rights, and particularly human rights. Thanks to the revolution which has taken place in international law since 1945, there is in place today a fully developed modern code of the rights of individuals against states and their public authorities - rights being here used in the sense of specific claims that are internationally accepted as legitimate and are therefore entitled to legal protection. These rights cover a wide range - civil, political, social, economic and cultural. They include the right to life; to liberty and security; to freedom of movement; to a decent standard of living; to health, marriage, family, work, rest and leisure; to social security, education and training; to legal, mental and moral integrity; to assembly, association, participation in public affairs; and a variety of others. Having been adopted as international standards, they need no longer be justified by recourse to any religious or philosophical system, or any tenuous theories of 'natural law'. Nor are they culture-specific.

## OMELETTE.....

Much like the metre, the watt and the gram, their objectivity stems from common consent, and they are therefore capable of dispassionate - and indeed even of 'scientific' - analysis.

### The Right to Development

In 1981, the International Commission of Jurists held a week-long conference on this very subject at the Hague. It was an event of high importance for all who are concerned with the ends, as well as the means, of development, and it may well mark a turning point in the international consideration of that whole subject.

The main problem about the 'right to development' is who should have it. If you give it to the individual, there is precious little he or she can do with it - unlike, say, the right to freedom of movement or expression. Effective development programmes can only be undertaken by states and their public authorities. But if you give this right to states, it cannot by definition be a 'human' right: human rights are rights vested in individuals and exercised *against* states. Besides, there is always a risk that if you give some states new rights, they will just use them as new pretexts for violating the human rights of individuals. And yet, on the international plane, a right to development is precious little use unless it *is* vested in states, so that it can give legitimacy to claims which they make against each other, such as the claim for the establishment of a New International Economic Order.

It was that dilemma which The Hague conference was convened to resolve. The assembled jurists - over 50 of them, including many of high international distinction - worked on it for a week, assisted by 9 leading development experts. Their solution was both original and important. First, they made the vital link between development and human rights by postulating the second as the end of the first:

Development should be understood as a process designed progressively to create conditions in which every person can enjoy, exercise and utilise under the Rule of Law all his human rights, whether economic, social, cultural, civil or political.

Next, they defined the *human* (that is, the individual's) right to development:

Every person has the right to participate in, and benefit from, development in the sense of a progressive improvement in the standard and quality of life.

For that human right, the correlative obligations rest upon states, both singly and collectively:

The primary obligation to promote development, in such a way as to satisfy this right, rests upon each State for its own territory and for the persons under its jurisdiction. As the development process is a necessary condition for peace and

friendship between nations, it is a matter of international concern, imposing responsibilities upon all States.

Accordingly,

a State promoting its own development within its available resources is entitled to the support of other States in the implementation of its policies.

In sum, there are two rights to development: the individual's and the state's, and the first constrains the second. To invoke its right to development in the international community, a state must show that its development strategy serves the only legitimate end - that is, the enjoyment, exercise and utilization by all its inhabitants of all their human rights under the Rule of Law. Without that, no national development strategy is sufficiently legitimate to entitle the state concerned to call for the support of the other members of the international community. This is an important new approach, and it comes providentially at a time when the process of elaboration and recognition of a right to development in international law is at a critical stage.

### The Omelette Thesis

With few exceptions, post-revolutionary and post-colonial governments have claimed that rapid economic development necessarily requires restrictions on individual freedom. These may begin with say, exchange controls and land reform. Not infrequently, they move on to the proscription of trade unions, the direction of labour, and detention without trial. And they may end, disastrously, with re-education camps and mass executions. At all stages, the justification offered is the same: 'we need to impose at least some temporary restrictions on individual freedom, in order to accelerate economic development in our country after having been held back for so long by the *ancien regime*.' A more succinct version is 'human rights begin after breakfast', which is only a non-technical way of saying that economic and social rights have priority over civil and political ones. The counter-slogan used by those who would wish to reverse that priority is 'human rights begin at the police station'. In fact, both slogans are equally wrong, or perhaps equally right: as the UN General Assembly declared as long ago as 1977 in its famous Resolution 32/130, all human rights are indivisible and interdependent, and none of them ranks in priority over any others. The most cynical formulation of the thesis is the one rather dubiously attributed to Lenin (who probably used it, if at all, in another context): 'You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs.'

The metaphors may be homely, but is this thesis true? One of the more remarkable things about the development industry is that no one engaged in it ever seems to have gone out into the real world with his measuring instruments to see whether there is any empirical evidence to support it. Many scientists in other fields would regard this as a major blot on the escutcheon of a new discipline: one can hardly claim that something is a science if one is not willing and able to test hypotheses by observation, even if not by specific and

## OMELETTE.....

repeatable experiments. Yet here is one of the major hypotheses of the world of development, repeated over and over again, in various formulations, by politicians, officials, bankers, industrialists and a fair number of academics. On a few occasions, it has been publicly challenged - and yet there is so far not a single study that has even attempted to test the thesis by empirical observation - when it is surely important to know whether it is founded on observable fact or is no more than an assertion of unverified faith, belief or ideology. What kind of science can this be?

Let me give some examples. The *locus classicus* for the omelette thesis was the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin. During his administration, the country's economic development proceeded at an unprecedented pace, while at least one, and probably several, million citizens were liquidated - to say nothing of the restrictions on the liberties of the rest. That process certainly provided one item of empirical evidence to support the omelette thesis. Yet, though it is now seldom cited, the same period in the same region also supplied a striking piece of equally empirical evidence the other way. With a comparable history of earlier oppression (in this case foreign rather than domestic), and a comparable base in natural resources, skills and technology, Czechoslovakia between the wars also achieved an unprecedented rate of economic growth - against the trend of the rest of Central and Western Europe - but managed to combine it with an unprecedented *increase* in the liberties of its citizens.

Nor is this the only pair of comparable but contrasting cases. Costa Rica, for a long time the only free democracy in Central America, has made substantial economic progress since 1948; Nicaragua next door, under the contemptible Somoza dictatorship, made far less. Gabon is about as free as anywhere in Francophone Africa, and its economy is thriving; under Macias, Equatorial Guinea was a murderous prison for years, and the regime that made it so also destroyed its economy. Clearly, there is not a one-to-one casual relationship between breaking eggs and making omelettes: some countries have managed to make omelettes without breaking eggs, and others have broken all too many eggs and still lamentably failed to make any omelettes.

So, if there is a relationship, it must be probabilistic: the thesis would then take a form such as: 'You are *more likely* to make omelettes if you break some eggs'. But not even that modified version has yet been tested by looking at the empirical evidence: I know of no published study which attempts to correlate indicators of economic development with the protection and enjoyment of human rights, or the lack of it. Now of course neither of these phenomena is easy to measure; we all know the limitations on the commonly used indicators in both these fields. But at least for statistical purposes, even crude and inaccurate measurements will do, provided they are consistently applied to samples sufficiently large to give significant results.

### Some Primitive 'Research'

So, in a spirit more provocative than rigorously scientific, I took it upon myself a little time ago to carry out a very crude

and simple piece of empirical 'research' of my own. Let me use this occasion to publish the results.

On 13 March 1978, *Time* magazine conveniently published 3 relevant indices, for the same year, for 129 of the world's countries: the Per Capita Product ('PCP'), which gives at least a crude measure of the resources available for economic development; the Personal Quality of Life Index ('PQLI'), designed by the Overseas Development Council of Washington DC as a measure of the welfare of a country's population, based on rates of life expectancy, literacy and infant mortality; and the Political Freedom Index ('PFI'), compiled by Freedom House of Manhattan from studies of civil and political rights, and designed to measure a nation's respect for the liberties of its inhabitants. The countries were divided into five groups by economic systems, and those of the Third World into their four geographic regions, so giving nine different samples of countries which had at least something in common with each other.

At my request, IBM (UK) Ltd very kindly computed the correlation coefficients, and their significance levels, for all three pairs of these indices for each of the nine samples, and for all the 129 countries taken together. The results are shown in the table. Some of them confirm what one would have expected to find. For example, all the correlations between PCP and PQLI are positive: on the whole, the richer countries within a group tend to provide better welfare for their citizens. But the correlation is not of the same strength in all the groups: the Social Democratic countries have the strongest (+0.86, which is slightly higher than the Marxist-Leninist ones at +0.78); the capitalist countries come next with +0.64, and the Third World Socialist countries (mostly in Africa) last with +0.27 - and there is a probability of about 1 in 10 that this last figure could have been produced by chance.

#### Development Policy Review

TABLE

	Correlation coefficient	Significance level
<i>All Countries (129)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.49	0.000
PCP v. PFI	+0.46	0.000
PQLI v. PFI	+0.63	0.000
<i>Capitalist (30)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.64	0.000
PCP v. PFI	+0.77	0.000
PQLI v. PFI	+0.61	0.000
<i>Mixed Economy (50)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.33	0.009
PCP v. PFI	+0.23	0.053
PQLI v. PFI	+0.71	0.000

TABLE

	Correlation coefficient	Significance level
<i>Social Democratic (13)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.86	0.000
PCP v. PFI	+0.63	0.010
PQLI v. PFI	+0.61	0.012
<i>Third World Socialist (23)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.27	0.107
PCP v. PFI	-0.01	0.477
PQLI v. PFI	+0.74	0.000
<i>Marxist-Leninist (13)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.78	0.001
PCP v. PFI	+0.15	0.313
PQLI v. PFI	+0.34	0.135
<i>Africa (44)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.32	0.018
PCP v. PFI	-0.06	0.350
PQLI v. PFI	+0.42	0.002
<i>South Americaa (12)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.54	0.034
PCP v. PFI	+0.33	0.153
PQLI v. PFI	+0.13	0.350
<i>Central America (11)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.85	0.000
PCP v. PFI	+0.25	0.209
PQLI v. PFI	+0.40	0.116
<i>South East Asia (9)</i>		
PCP v. PQLI	+0.71	0.015
PCP v. PFI	+0.47	0.104
PQLI v. PFI	+0.70	0.018

Now for the omelette thesis. If these data supported it, one would expect to find at least some strong and significant negative correlations between PFI and the other measures. Yet, out of all those 20 correlations, only 2 (with PCP) have coefficients with a negative sign, with the princely magnitudes of - 0.01 and -0.06 respectively, in neither case at any reliable level of significance. The most one can

deduce from those two lonely and diminutive numbers is that, in those two groups, there is no significant connection between a country's wealth and the freedom of its citizens: they are as likely to be rich prisoners as poor

ones, or to be either rich or poor but free.

Everywhere else, the correlations between PFI on the one hand, and the two development indicators on the other, are *significantly positive*. With PCP, the correlation this time is strongest in the Capitalist countries at + 0.77 followed by the Social Democratic group at +0.63, and the Mixed Economies at +0.23. It is lowest in the Marxist-Leninist group at +0.15 (a result that has about 1 chance in 3 of being random); unlike the other groups, the richer Marxist-Leninist countries do not tend to give their citizens significantly more freedom than the poorer ones.

In the correlations between PFI and PQLI, the Third World Socialist countries come out 'best' - the more effectively they use their wealth (such as it is) to provide welfare for their citizens, the more also do they end to respect their citizens' freedoms. They are closely followed by the Mixed Economies; the Capitalists and the Social Democrats run equal third; and once again the Marxist-Leninist trail behind - though the correlation for them is twice as high, and decidedly more significant, than the one between PFI and PCP.

I am of course perfectly conscious of all the criticisms which may be levelled against such a jejune piece of 'research'. It used only the crudest indices - so, I answer, let someone devise some more refined ones. Instead of following the *process* of development over a period of years in order to see the *rates* at which these things change, it uses the inferior technique of a static snapshot - so, I say, let someone devise and carry out a more dynamic study.

And it would of course be quite illegitimate to infer causation from mere correlation. I could not therefore even begin to argue that my figures provide empirical support for the thesis that respect for human rights can promote or facilitate economic development. If that were true, one would expect to find at least some strong and significant negative correlations in my table. There being none, I therefore assert that I have cast substantial doubt on the status of the omelette thesis as a proposition of empirical fact.

That claim, like the thesis itself, is of course falsified by further empirical observations, and by wider and deeper analysis. I can only hope that others, better qualified than I, will now undertake that task. When their results are published, we shall see whether they provide any empirical support for the omelette thesis. Until then, I shall maintain my claim. And so long as that claim stands uncontroverted, the spokesmen for oppressive governments might be wise to seek other justifications for what they now do in the name of development.