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# UNIT 3 CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT

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## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In a general manner of speaking development is considered to be about widening people's choices in life in as democratic and participatory manner as possible such that people are able to realise their fullest potential. At the same time development is considered as the means of promoting the economic growth and self-reliance of a nation with as much **concern** for equity as possible. Definitions of development are contextual and dependent on the epistemological and methodological orientation of the theorists. Accordingly, there is evident a multiplicity of labels associated with development, namely 'reconstruction and development', 'economic development', 'modernisation', 'redistribution with growth', 'dependent development', 'interdependent development', 'meeting basic needs'; 'top-down development', 'bottom-up development', 'another development', '**empowerment**', 'post-development', and 'post-modern development'. The most general source of **confusion** in these definitions of development is that of means and ends. Development appears as both means and the end; the end is often assumed to be present at the onset of the process of development itself. If, for instance, development is considered about increasing the choices of people, it has to be assumed that the desire and capacity to choose and knowledge of various options are available. However these elements of the process of choosing are assumed to be as much preconditions for the development process as the ends in which the process results. This contradiction is evident even in the notion of "**instrumental freedoms**" in Amartya Sen's theory of development as freedom.

However, amidst the plethora of contested and negotiated understandings of development, two ideas have stood the test of time, namely 'progress' and 'modernisation'. If one traces the lineage of 'development' back to Thomas Malthus, August Comte and J.H. Newman, one comes across the ideas of progress, intent to develop and stewardship. The idea of progress referred to the linear unfolding of the universal potential for human empowerment which need not be recurrent, finite or reversible. It was initially believed that the revelation of God through an increasingly scientific understanding of Nature made a potentially limitless progress possible. In its more secular and somewhat later versions, the idea of progress spelt out the possibility of directing the potentially unlimited capacity **for improvement through the human effort of labour.**

The idea of modernisation and its **contemporary** incarnation as neo-liberalism has enjoyed long-standing dominance. This is because it remains consistent with the ideology of neoclassical economics which is the dominant paradigm of development in the West, it is a very simplistic and universalistic formulation, it has had strong institutional advocates, and it has had the luck arising **from** the failure of alternative interventionist strategies in the 1960s and 1970s. Modernisation theory is now to be seen in new **forms** such as late modernity, advanced modernity, radical or reworked modernity, neo-modernisation theory or new modernity. New modernity includes the notion of risk society meaning that all developed and developing societies are exposed to the **globalised** ecological and other risks.

However, by the mid-1980s, there was an impasse in mainstream understanding of development mainly because of failures of development projects around the globe, the dismantling of socialist systems as alternatives, growing economic diversities in developing nations, the crying need for environmental sustainability, the increasing assertiveness of voices 'from below', and the rise of post-modernism to universalising theories. There have been sustained critiques – ranging from 'dependency theory' to 'post-modern development' - of the ideas of progress and modernisation which have focused on the unrequited dominance of a particular ideology, **exclusion** of certain groups from the development project, and on the processes and procedures of development. Development is rejected because variously it means the new religion of the West, it is the imposition of science as power, it does not work, it means cultural Westernisation and **homogenisation**, and it brings environmental destruction. Mainstream development economics is reductionist in nature **and** therefore has to be rejected not only in terms of its results but also in terms of its world-view, intentions and **mindset**.

Some of this criticism has coagulated into alternative thinking, although in the long run many strands of these alternatives have been co-opted by mainstream development understanding so much so that today it is difficult to distinguish very clearly mainstream and alternative development approaches. Nonetheless many of these criticisms have highlighted the need for greater self-consciousness, reflexivity and encouragement of heterogeneity and difference. Many of the traditional or indigenous traditions, histories and 'knowledges', which were subjugated or excluded by colonial and modernist developmental regimes as being primitive or irrelevant, have been highlighted to contrast them with the **arrogance** of models from the West.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This Unit enables you to understand

- The concept of development and its critique **from** varied perspectives
- Development as related to environment
- The sustainable development that is in practice.

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## **3.2 THE ENVIRONMENT: TWO VIEWS**

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One of the major critiques of development has come **from** the environmental and ecological movement, The influence of environmental concerns on development policy was **recognised** for the first time by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development – **the** Brundtland Commission – and at the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

These Reports produced an international consensus to apply environmental criteria to the development projects in order to attain sustainable development which was defined by the Brundtland Commission as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." However many environmental agenda are not concerned with developmental goals. This is because there are two different meanings to the term 'environment'. One meaning identifies the environment with the natural world whilst another regards it as all human and non-human activities and entities which are external to a particular sphere of decision making and action such as a development project.

When we look at the environment as nature, we find that the boundary between humanity and nature runs like a perpetual theme in human consciousness, much influenced by the degree and nature of domination and subjugation of the forces of nature. In contrast to early human visions of nature as being imbued with supernatural force and grace, the European Enlightenment proclaimed the conquest of nature as an essential ingredient in the human quest to overcome constraints in the path of greater fulfilment of its desires. In this imperialist vision, the role of nature was utilitarian, to be used for the achievement of happiness by humanity. However the development of industrial society, first in Europe and later in the rest of the world, prompted a questioning of the extent and nature of the human understanding of the changes it had effected over nature. This often took the form of an escape by the rich from the squalor of the newly-developing cities to the pristine splendour of rural areas. This gradually formulated itself into a position of the romantic rejection of the industrialists' utilitarian approach to nature. As a matter of fact it was thought that the real force of nature was to be experienced in the rural and mountainous regions. Between these two views of nature as a romantic idyll and nature as an exploitable resource was a third view which perceived human beings as being superior to nature but at the same time being responsible for its efficient management. This view gradually became popular with the growth of the conservation movement in Europe and America which called for huge areas of untouched nature to be kept aside and protected from human activity.

However environmental regulation in the Western industrial societies (and now in other parts of the world too) has been led by a broader meaning of the term 'environment'. According to this understanding there is an uneven distribution amongst people of the costs and benefits of industrial action on the environment. Usually, whilst the industrialists and developers gather most of the benefits the cost tabs are left to be picked up by the working class and other less powerful social groups. These external costs include unsafe working conditions, unhealthy and polluted living conditions, and a diminished scope for recreation and for aesthetic pursuits. Although this was the scenario in the nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century it became more and more of an untenable proposition because of greater political consciousness. There was a greater demand to make the polluter pay through public health and environmental legislation. This approach was institutionalised with the establishment in 1969 of the Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S., which was concerned with environmental impact assessment of all government works. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has become the norm in both the public and private sectors across the world today. In this perspective, the environment includes not only nature but also those parts of human society which are external to a development project or activity. In this sense the term environment addresses the conflicts of interest posed by the unequal distribution of costs and benefits – the externalities – of development.

Therefore the environment as nature is focused on conservation and protection of vast

swathes of land from human interference whilst the externality view on the environment includes the impact of human activity on nature but is predominantly applied from the utilitarian perspective of who owns, uses or manages the natural resources concerned. The overlap between the two views explains the ability of the environmental agenda to unite a broad range of views although there may be several bristling issues in the implementation of the programme of sustainable development.

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### 3.3 ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT: THREE APPROACHES

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According to the modernisation perspective – whether of the capitalist or socialist brands – natural resources do not constitute a limit to economic growth. Technological triumphalism ruled the roost and this got manifested by grand projects to harness nature and construct infrastructure projects. The costs of such massive infrastructure projects nature was to be conserved by demarcating certain 'pristine areas and prohibiting economic and other human activity, leading to a separation of nature from development. However, realisation soon dawned that this path makes mankind vulnerable to the destructive power of industry over nature. The risks of nuclear technology and pesticide accumulation in food-chains highlighted these issues. There was also the concern that limited and finite resources would pose a potential brake on economic growth, on unlimited production and consumption. The proverbial last straw was the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica which highlighted the issue of chlorofluorocarbons arising from refrigeration gases and aerosol propellants. This discovery confirmed the worst fears that the danger is world-wide and that our scientific knowledge of the atmosphere was severely limited. Henceforth it became impossible to bank on technological triumphalism and stressed the need for global regulation of industrialisation. This gave a boost to the environmental movements for sustainable development.

By the 1980s, however, modernisation gave way to neo-liberalism. This effected a change in the approach to the environment. Neo-classical environmental economics is the bedfellow of neo-liberalism which converts the goods of environment into commodities governed by market price mechanisms. The goods of nature such as air and water, landscape, etc. are considered as services provided by nature which are further taken to be a form of natural capital which can be augmented or depleted, leading to the further development of physical or financial capital. Environmental economics stresses that because the scarcity of natural resources is not reflected in adequate pricing mechanisms, they are overused. This conversion of environmental goods in monetary terms played a major role in the absorption of environmental concerns into mainstream development thinking. However, environmental economics deals with aggregate demand and the distribution of the demand only in terms of purchasing power. The unequal distribution of purchasing power between countries and within countries highlights the need for proper distribution of ownership of natural capital. Environmental economics would therefore work only if property rights and institutional access to and use of natural resources are fairly addressed.

Interestingly, the environment has proved to be the rallying ground for much of the opposition to the neo-liberal project of development today. This has often taken the form of alternative thinking on the environment. One of the perspectives is the **communitarian one** which stresses on the knowledge, social support and cohesion of local communities. Some of the themes stressed are the effectiveness of local institutions in regulating use of natural resource, facilitating role of women as users and managers of resources, and

advantages of small-scale owner-operated systems of production. By arguing that the poorest should benefit most from sustainable development, this perspective is able to place the poor at the centre of the development debate. Local ownership and rights of disadvantaged sections over local resources have been stressed based on the entitlement theory of rights. It is claimed that such an approach actually goes a long way in conserving common resources globally. This perspective is bulwarked by a movement for rights of indigenous peoples and those living in rain-forest areas. Anthological and development field-studies have now provided widely circulated knowledge of how local communities are experts in preserving commons and other natural resources such as land, water, forests, grazing lands, etc. Local communities also have extensive knowledge of diversity of species and are therefore crucial in biodiversity conservation. Significantly, the management strategies of people living in the 'wilds' have challenged the Eurocentric notion of separating nature from development under the modernisation perspective: examples abound of how humans, human activity and nature can sustainably co-exist. This strengthens post-modern analyses of universalistic solutions in favour of socially constructed multiple realities. It also strengthens the thesis that indigenous criteria and perception of resource conservation should be considered as valid as those arising from scientific study. Political economy analyses have been used to argue for greater economic and political rights over the use of natural resources by people who have been pushed to the margins by mainstream development.

One of the advantages of the people-centred alternatives is that they rigorously examine power relations in the domain of resource use – power relations between local communities and the external agencies of the state and market are thoroughly scrutinised. This conglomerate of approaches stresses on rights-based advocacy and pose the greatest counter-challenge to the dominant neo-liberal model of development and environment. The environmental agenda of sustainable development thus provide a broader canvas for many of these groups to achieve their aims.

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### **3.4 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE**

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Whilst it is true that sustainable development has become the rallying cry as well as victory point of many environmental and ecological protest groups and counter-perspectives, the battle is by no means over as the very meaning of sustainable development is being debated by the neo-liberals and their opponents in the development domain. Agenda 21 reflects a tension between the neo-liberal emphasis on allocation of natural resources through market mechanisms and the local and participatory emphasis of the alternative schools. In practice, there is a lot of negotiation which has taken place between these two perspectives in the internationally ratified treaties on biodiversity, climate change and desertification.

For instance, the discovery of a hole in the ozone layer led to the Montreal protocol of 1987 which agreed to limit the use of CFCs. In fact it was decided soon after that the manufacture of CFCs should cease by 2000. This international agreement was the model for a more wide-ranging agreement required to tackle the issue of greenhouse gases which were contributing to the rise of the earth's temperature. A decade of hectic scientific and governmental effort to take a look at the phenomenon of climate change followed the 1979 World Climate Conference, resulting in the 1988 Intergovernmental Panel on Climatic Change (IPCC) by the World Meteorological Office and the United Nations Environment Programme. In 1990, the IPCC recommended a reduction of green house

gases to 60 per cent of the 1990 level and in 1992, at the Rio Summit, a framework document for a convention on climate change recognised the need to protect climate change. What was new was the emphasis on equity such that different countries had different responsibilities and capabilities. This meant that developed countries took the lead of reducing greenhouse gases to the 1990 levels by 2000. Inventories of greenhouse gas emissions and sinks by the signatories were to be monitored by the newly-instituted Global Environmental Facility at the World Bank. The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 committed industrialised countries to reduce their collective emission of greenhouse gases to an average of 5.2 per cent below the 1990 levels by 2012. However the U.S. was successful in inserting some mechanisms which would enable the industrialised countries to reduce their gas emissions through activities taken 'abroad rather than at home.

In this entire effort, manoeuvres, **negotiations** and **shifting** alliances, although the levels of environmental concerns vary between European Union member states it is strong and growing in many countries. Strong emission reductions have been effected in Germany and the U.K. The internal allocation of emissions within the EU has enabled the least industrialised countries within it to increase their emissions whilst the overall EU levels are likely to match the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol. On the other hand, the position of the U.S. has not been so straight-forward. Home to some 25 per cent of the worldwide emissions there has been hostility amongst U.S. consumers, corporations and labour unions. The industries in the U.S. were very keen at Kyoto that they be not made subject to emission reductions from which other countries were exempt. Hence the U.S. acceptance of targets was conditional that there would not be change in the use of domestic energy. Through transfers under the Kyoto Protocol's joint implementation mechanism, the U.S. could reduce its commitments because of the reduction in emissions of the erstwhile Soviet-bloc countries. The other OECD countries allied with the U.S. because of high political costs of energy reduction or high marginal costs of emission reduction in already **efficient** energy sectors. The erstwhile Soviet-bloc countries joined the U.S. alliance because they could exchange the 'surplus' emission reductions in their countries with the U.S. for higher U.S. or Japanese investments in their countries. By contrast, many developing nations were vulnerable to rise in sea levels because of climate change and they vociferously advocated the strongest measures for emission reduction. On the other hand India, China and some Latin American countries - all of which were rapidly industrialising - were for economic development as their priority and for national sovereignty in decisions regarding emissions. They were **successful** in blocking the imposition of emission-reducing targets but failed to block the flexibility mechanisms of the U.S. and other countries.

Increasingly the resistance of U.S. industrialists is reducing because it is becoming clear that 'carbon trading' by building wind, solar and other clean energy facilities in non-industrialised countries and selling carbon credits so acquired to industrialised countries was a golden **opportunity**. However, the general trade and market in emission credits were to have several limitations. The Kyoto protocol is likely to have only a modest effect on global warming as it would only bring about a change in the culture of energy use and a search for technological alternatives to fossil fuels. Secondly, **from** the economic standpoint, "evolving market-based mechanisms for implementing the protocol through a proliferation of projects to generate emission reductions via flexibility mechanisms - action abroad, rather than domestic reform of energy use - risked an inflationary effect on the value of the (fixed) amount of emissions to which the industrialized countries had committed themselves under the protocol, undermining any incentive for technological innovation.

Thirdly, from the political standpoint, failure to demonstrate domestic reform would undermine the 'moral leadership' of the industrialized countries on emission reduction, and with it any hope of extending future reductions to developing countries" (Woodhouse, 2002).

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### 3.5 SUMMARY

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There are different ideas of development depending on the theoretical perspective of the purveyor. Two ideas, however, which have stood the test of time, have been that of progress and modernisation. Development has been conceptualised as an unlimited linear growth of human potential or as the spread of Western utilitarian modernity throughout the globe. However a number of alternative perspectives, ranging from dependency theory to post-modern development, have seriously challenged the ideas of progress and modernisation as development, resulting in a greater emphasis on reflexivity and on indigenous cultures and ideas of development. One of the startling phenomena has been the absorption of many of these alternatives in mainstream development agenda.

Two views on the environment have subtended the development debate. One sees the environment or nature as separated from nature which has to be subjugated for utilitarian purposes, or separated in swathes to be conserved, or to be used but under a strict programme of stewardship. The other view takes notice of the fact that costs and benefits of the use and exploitation of nature have differential impact on people depending on which side of ownership they stand and therefore call for environmental impact assessments in all developmental projects.

The first view of modernisation has given rise to technological triumphalism through which the massive infrastructure projects on nature were constructed. However, it was soon realised that there are limits to growth based on infinite exploitation of natural resources and this created an atmosphere of sustainable development. However, by the 1980s, neo-liberalism became the ruling ideology and it focused on the contention that unless environmental goods are priced to match their scarcity, there would be overuse of natural resources. Both modernisation and neo-classical environmental economics have been challenged today by a plethora of environmental movements and perspectives which have focused on the gender, local and participative nature of far more sustainable projects. Focusing on the communitarian nature of many sustainable measures of the environment the world over, these perspectives pose the greatest challenge to mainstream environmental thinking.

In practice there is a continuing conflict between mainstream and alternative perspectives on development and the environment; nowhere is this more reflected than in the negotiations and parleys between different countries when it comes to the framing of international arrangements for control of CFCs, greenhouses gases and climate change in particular. The call for stricter adherence to emission controls by the developing nations has clashed with the drive for a market for carbon trading by the developed nations. The Kyoto protocol is witness to this continuing struggle.

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### 3.6 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the different approaches to development according to their main ideological bases.

2. Critically examine the three types of relationship between the environment and development.
3. Discuss the main critiques of mainstream development.
4. Study the critiques and counter-critiques of development in the major international agreements on the environment and climate change.

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## **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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Woodhouse, P., 'Development Policies and Environmental Agendas', In U. Kothari and M. Minogue, (eds), *Development Theory and Practice: Critical Perspectives*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002.

Pieterse, Jan N., 'The Development of Development Theory: Towards Critical Globalism'. *Review of International Political Economy*, 3(4), 1996, pp. 541-564.

Pieterse, Jan N., 'After Post-Development', *Third World Quarterly*, 21(2), 2000, pp.175-191.