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Introducing global development

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About this free course

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Introduction

Development is about change that is a result of human activity, and such change has happened throughout human existence. In this course, you will first examine a particular framing of change processes − that associated with industrialisation and the concept of a 'modern' society. The view of development as modernisation emerged clearly in the 1950s and 1960s, although its origins can be traced back much further. Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the economic, social, cultural and political systems of countries in Western Europe and North America were transformed and, in the post Second World War period, the industrialised countries were the dominant actors in the international system. They promoted a message that all societies should aspire to follow in their path and become technologically advanced and modern. Such a view of development gives rise to an established perspective that sees a stark divide between the wealthy and powerful 'developed' countries of the global 'North' and the poorer, marginalised 'developing' countries of the global 'South'.

You will explore the arguments for questioning and potentially moving away from such a binary view. There is increasing recognition of a need to think about development in global terms, a perspective that recognises that all countries are affected by, and need to participate and collaborate in, addressing the serious global issues of the twenty-first century. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an important step in this direction. To support and provoke your thinking on global issues and on the SDGs, you will be introduced to PASH (Power, Agency, Scope, History), a conceptual and analytical framework created for the course.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course DD870 *Understanding global development*. You might also be interested in the related OpenLearn course, DD871 *Introducing key global development challenges*. To find out more, explore this OpenLearn article, which includes a video explaining what you can expect to learn.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- use ideas of global development to better understand the interconnectedness of the world and how it shapes the major social, economic, political and environmental issues
- appreciate the global development agenda as represented by the Sustainable Development Goals and key development issues such as migration and environmental sustainability
- understand how to use a conceptual framework (PASH) to analyse global development.

1 Global issues

Before considering ideas of development, pause for a moment to think about the nature of issues. Issues are topics of importance within specific contexts and the subject of discussion and disagreement. In recent times, climate change, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), the war in Ukraine (2022) are examples of global issues. They have directly and indirectly impacted people all over the world. They feature prominently in national and international media, and provoke strong reactions, arguments, and debate amongst people in many countries.

A common thread in such issues is that they are highly complex. They involve interconnected and interdependent social, economic, political, and cultural processes that operate at local, national, regional, and international levels. COVID-19 spread across the world due to the highly mobile nature of modern life and its impacts were felt on social, health and economic systems in practically every country and continent. Developing vaccines for the virus required timely and effective actions by governments and citizens, technological adaptation and innovation, and collaboration between scientific, technological and health professionals around the world. However, successful technological innovation is only one strand of the story. Questions of justice arise when developed countries and regional bodies such as the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) have the capacity to reach advance agreements with pharmaceutical companies for supplies of vaccines (Papaioannou, 2022). The result is that economically less-powerful countries in Africa, Latin America and South Asia are disadvantaged. These latter countries have less capacity to absorb the health and economic shocks from the pandemic. Here you can see the connection to issues of poverty and exclusion. Overall, the prioritising of vaccine supplies to high-income countries seems to be self-defeating as COVID-19 does not respect national boundaries, and mutated variants emerge to replace the original ones.

Contemplating such issues raises questions regarding accountability and responsibility. Consider the oceans on planet Earth today, the oceans are filled with human-generated plastics, coral reefs are disappearing, fish stocks are being depleted and water temperatures are rising. The oceans are critical to the health of ecosystems globally and to climate stability. But who should take the lead in changing matters? Who should intervene? Who should pay the costs? Who should answer for any wrongs done? There are no easy, if any, answers to such questions. However, we can seek to better understand and to respond to such issues by using a range of key social science concepts and by looking at them from a global perspective. This course provides an introduction to doing this, starting with a consideration of the nature of development.

2 Thinking about development

What is development? Development involves changing a situation. This is not as straightforward as it sounds since change is perceived and experienced very differently by different people. A given change can be considered to be for better or for worse. Think of a housing development. Some will see this in a very positive light, providing homes and facilities for human occupation and bringing new life into a town or village. Others will be unhappy with the increased urbanisation of their locality and increases in human activity and traffic. The development may involve loss of natural habitat or of farming land, but local businesses and schools may benefit from the increased demand for their services. There are many dimensions to such change, no matter where it occurs.

Figure 1: Aerial view of housing in Ireland: This is an example of a planned development although many of its side-effects may be unplanned. Such an interplay between planned and unplanned outcomes is a feature of many developmental processes.

The housing development is an example of an intentional planned development intervention happening at a local or national level. Such interventions are also undertaken at the international level.

International development is a term that emerged in the twentieth century to describe interventions undertaken by 'rich', 'developed' countries, primarily in Europe and North America, in 'poor', 'developing' countries, predominantly in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Central and Southern America. They aim to address big complex issues such as poverty, lack of access to health facilities and education, and food insecurity, all issues that are linked to global economies and political systems. An underlying assumption of such interventions, based on the experiences of 'developed' countries, is that progress and prosperity for all is linked to economic growth, technical innovation and industrialisation.

Activity 1: What does development mean to you?

Allow 10 minutes

When you hear the word 'development', what image or idea comes to mind? Think about your experiences of development or change at a personal or professional level. Was the development a planned intervention? Can you think of any unplanned outcomes?

As you will read in the following sections, there is an increasing consensus that the term *international development* is unhelpful and that thinking in terms of *global development* better captures the nature and needs of the twenty-first century.

3 The concept of international development

The use of the term *International Development* has its origins in the global political landscape of the twentieth century. As industrialisation spread across Europe, North America and Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, income inequalities with other parts of the world increased rapidly. The terms ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries emerged in fields of development study and practice and became a means of contrasting the different economic trajectories of the two groups of countries. The focus for international development policy and practice became one of addressing inequalities by enabling developing countries to emulate the economic pathways of developed countries and ‘to catch up’.

In this framing, development is associated with the purposeful and planned interventions undertaken by national governments of wealthier countries such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and by international development agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Activity 2: Views on development

Allow 15 minutes

In 2019, The Open University hosted the Development Studies Association (DSA) conference attended by academics, researchers, policymakers and practitioners all interested and working in the development industry. In Video 1, conference participants talk about the contrast between development in the twentieth and the twenty-first century.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1: What does development mean in the twenty-first century?

Discussion

Respondents in Video 1 see development as a process, a process that seeks to change problem situations for the better. A number commented that the conceptualisation of how such change should happen and who should be involved needs to be updated. In the twentieth century development was thought of in terms of ‘developed’ countries helping so-called ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’ countries to progress according to a Western model of modernisation.

In the twenty-first century, thinking in terms of such opposing binaries – developed and underdeveloped countries, the ‘rich’ global ‘North’ and the ‘poor’ global ‘South’, and those who work in development and recipients of development – is no longer appropriate. Important issues such as climate change and inequality affect people across the globe and are not confined to particular countries or continents.

4 Modernisation and development

The previous section highlights the need to critically examine accepted ideas, such as the understanding of development that emerged primarily in the United States and Western Europe in the last century. Doing so leads to an examination of the international power dynamics at work and of underlying assumptions and worldviews.

After the Second World War (post-1945), the industrialised countries of Europe and North America, often collectively referred to as the global ‘North’, were the dominant powers in the international system. The divide between them and the ‘developing’ countries of the global ‘South’ was not solely economic in nature, but also significant in terms of decision-making power. The United States, in particular, held great influence over global agreements and over major global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Development projects and funding was greatly influenced by ideas of modernisation and modernisation theory. These ideas position technology as a key driver of social change and at the heart of economic growth and progress. In this way of thinking, all countries should aspire to follow the path of industrialised countries.

The economic historian Walt W. Rostow likened industrialisation to flight and that of a plane taking off, a technological metaphor which fitted well with popular culture at the time. He outlined the process as occurring in five stages, as shown in the accompanying diagram.

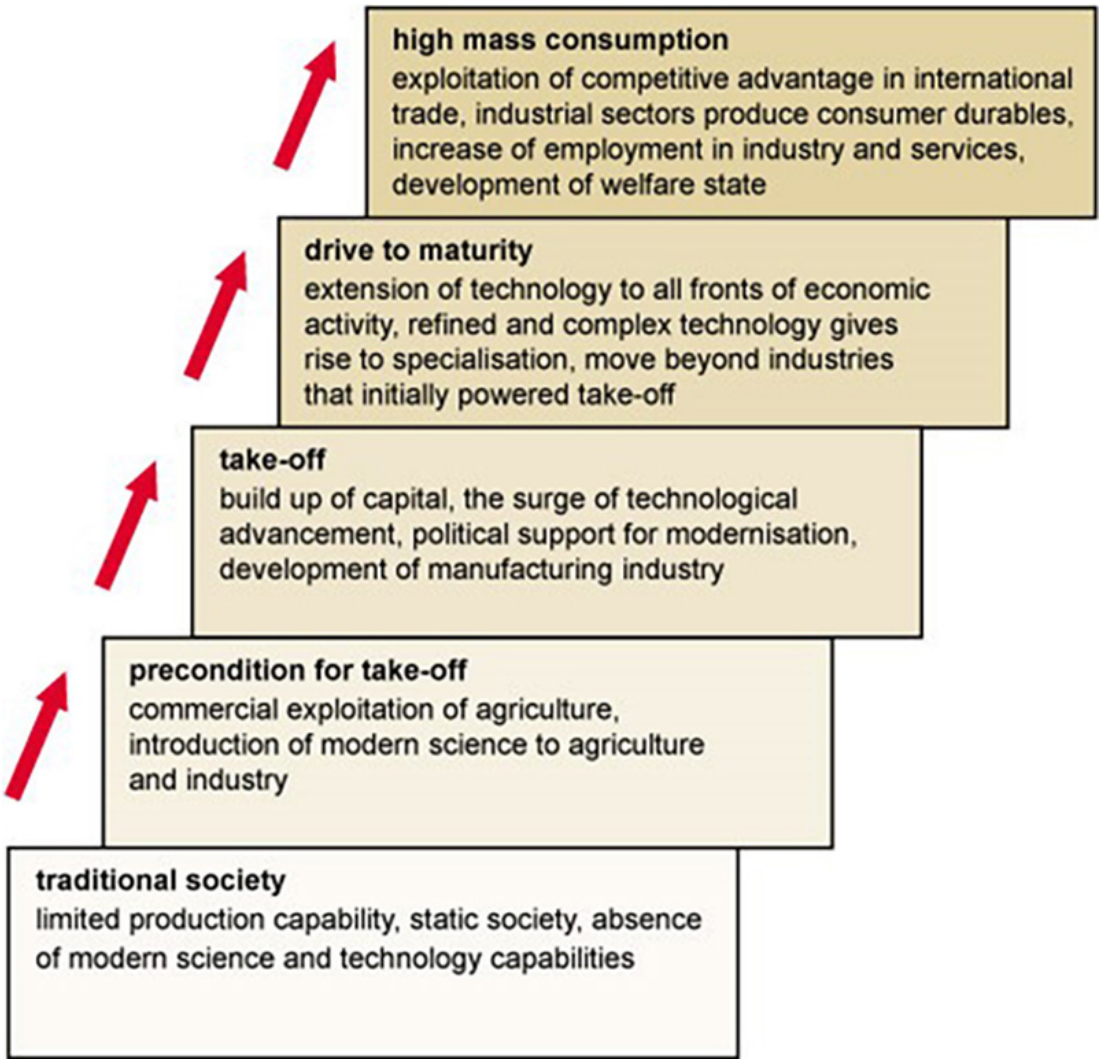

Figure 2: The five stages of economic growth (Rostow 1971)

In this process, ‘traditional’ societies are portrayed as unproductive, limited, and lacking the benefits of modern technology and science. With introduction and take-up of modern technologies, agricultural practices evolve and change, manufacturing industries develop and modernise. Technology spurs the evolution of service industries, employment rises, and consumer demand drives ongoing economic growth.

Taking a step further back in history, colonialism provided important influences in the evolution of modernisation theory and of international development. The process of decolonisation and granting of independence to former colonies brought with it a claimed sense of responsibility to promote social, economic and political reform in these countries following the model of developed countries (Hewitt, 2009). In this continuing dynamic, democracy is held up as the ideal governance system and individual choice is given precedence over social solidarity. It brings with it the idea of continuous improvement and progress, with science and technology being key to the process. Developed countries through institutions such as the World Bank used, and continue to use, their position of power and global influence to impose this way of thinking on developing countries in ways not always beneficial to these countries.

Figure 3: Oxcart taxi in Myanmar

Binary opposites? A traditional means of transport relying on animal power (Figure 3) contrasts with the technologically advanced high-speed train (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Italian high speed train

5 Adopting a critical stance

In the previous section, you were encouraged to take a critical look at the concept of international development and to examine the ideas, assumptions and values that influence the actions and policies of those who undertake development.

Taking a critical stance is a requirement of academic study and research. It is an ability that is learnt and developed through practice. When thinking critically, you question, analyse, and challenge what you are reading and what you are being told. Does an argument have sufficient evidence? If so, of what kind? Is the conclusion consistent and reasoned?

A further key element of taking a critical stance is thinking reflexively. This involves being prepared to subject your own judgements to critical examination. It is important to recognise the role your own personal background and biases might play in your critical thinking. It is all too easy to interpret other people's views in such a way that they reflect your own understanding and viewpoint. You seek confirmation of your thinking and may ignore contradictory interpretations. It is equally easy to prejudge what someone is saying and devalue or dismiss it because it does not make sense to you on your terms.

Now put on your critical hat and try out the below activity.

Activity 3: Being critical with data and statistics

Allow 25 minutes

Data takes many forms – numbers, words, measurements, observations. The collection, compilation, analysis, interpretation and presentation of data is crucial to social science research and to informing development practice. Data informs us of the number of people living in a city, the level of poverty in a country or the attitudes of a community towards a proposed new factory.

Statistics is that branch of mathematics that deals with numerical data. Raw numbers are converted into meaningful descriptions such as the percentage of children in a school who pass examinations, or the rate of increase of influenza infections in a city over the winter months. Statistics is also used to make inferences based on sampling a part of the population such as the overall literacy levels in a country.

The problem with statistics comes when they are accepted uncritically and seen as neutral and objective 'facts'. Statistics are produced through processes of definition, evaluation and interpretation and so are never neutral. They are often interpreted inappropriately. For instance, a correlation between two sets of data identifies a possible relationship between them but does not prove causation (Sage Research Methods, 2017). Statistical analysis may show a correlation between a high cholesterol diet and heart disease but does not prove that one causes the other. Doing so needs further research.

The following activity asks you to select a statistic from a choice of three for each question. Note which figure you choose and whether the correct answer comes as a surprise or not. What do you think influenced your choice?

Gapminder created a quiz aimed at debunking our assumptions about the state of the world under the conditions of global development. Gapminder tested thousands of people to generate their own statistics on the extent to which people typically hold incorrect assumptions about this set of development issues. The statistics in the

quiz below regarding how many people got each question wrong come from Gapminder's findings (Gapminder, no date b).

1. How much of the world's economy comes from agriculture, forestry and fishing?

○ Around 4%

Yes, but 84% of people were wrong.

200 years ago, these economic activities made up much more than 5%, but that is not true today (World Bank, 2021). Poor countries won't get rich from such exports. Makes you think, right?

○ Around 24%

○ Around 44%

2. What share of countries in the world have laws against sexual harassment at work?

○ Around 35%

○ Around 55%

○ Around 75%

Yes, but 92% of people were wrong.

78% of countries have laws against sexual harassment at work (Tavares and Wodon, 2017). The problem is that these laws are not enforced.

3. What percentage of the world's population lives in megacities (cities with at least ten-million people)?

○ Around 8%

Yes, but 77% of people were wrong.

While the world is urbanising, most people still live in cities smaller than ten-million people (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). The media tends to focus more on megacities than on other urban areas. The abundance of images showing megacities also perpetuate this misconception.

○ Around 28%

○ Around 48%

4. How much of the excess heat from global warming is captured in the oceans?

○ Around 10%

○ Around 50%

○ Around 90%

Yes, but 90% of people were wrong.

The global ocean is a heat trap, capturing most global warming (Rhein et al., 2013). You may find the sea's temperature cold, but the world's corals, fish, and polar bears would beg to differ. Imagine how much hotter it would be without healthy oceans.

5. What share of the world's population don't have enough food to meet their daily needs?

○ Around 11%

Yes, but 79% of people were wrong.

While it is impossible to calculate an exact figure, estimates for wasted children (6.9% in 2019; FAO et al., 2020) and extreme poverty (9.4% in 2020; FAO et al., 2020) are both lower than 11%.

Overestimating the size of a problem can be linked to feelings of sympathy around suffering, but it can often lead to bad policy. Fewer people go hungry than people think; there is hope that hunger can be ended.

- ○ Around 23%
- ○ Around 37%

6. How many people in the world have access to safe drinking water in their home or close by?

- ○ Around 30%
- ○ Around 50%
- ○ Around 70%

Yes, but 82% of people were wrong.

While preventable infectious diseases and parasites are still waterborne, the majority of people have access to safe drinking water (WHO, 2019). This could be increased further by managing local water resources.

7. Of all energy used in the world, how much comes from natural gas, coal and oil?

- ○ Around 42%
- ○ Around 62%
- ○ Around 82%

Yes, but 65% of people were wrong.

Fossil fuels are still the dominant source of energy; despite advances in the availability and use of renewable energy, fossil fuels constitute around 82% of global energy use (e.g. BP, 2020). There's still a long way to go to cut harmful carbon emissions.

Discussion

What this quiz shows is that, when asked about statistics, many people make underestimates or overestimates. Choices may be influenced by media stories, the focus of social media exchanges, personal bias and assumptions. In some cases, such inaccuracy doesn't matter. In other situations, it may lead to negative attitudes, fearfulness, or poor decision-making. Critical appraisal of statistical data is essential.

6 The global nature of development

In the previous sections, you read of international development and how it frames development in terms of North-South, developed-developing countries. The problem with such a way of thinking about development is that it consistently leads to a view that developing countries need the intervention of developed countries in order to progress and to address the issues that they face. It not only perpetuates existing power imbalances in the way that global institutions have been set up and operate, but it also undermines the capacity of developing countries to determine their own development pathways.

Interventions often do not produce what is claimed to be the desired result. In the 1980s and 1990s, the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the World Bank and the IMF provided loans to developing countries experiencing an economic crisis. The loan conditions required political and economic reforms supposedly aimed at addressing the root cause of the problem and providing for long-term development and growth. However, they had very mixed results and it was the poorest in society who suffered most from the austerity measures imposed (Stewart, 1995).

In going from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, there is increasing acknowledgement that the development agenda needs to recognise the universal nature of some of the important global development issues of our times, such as environmental sustainability, migration, poverty and economic security. By seeing development issues as primarily affecting 'developing', rather than all, countries, an international development framework is very limiting. Such a perspective overlooks many of the interdependencies between the social, economic, political, and environmental fortunes of all countries around the world. It is increasingly argued that a global development approach is better suited to the analysis of the universal and interdependent nature of complex development issues.

Activity 4: Why global development?

Allow 35 minutes

Listen to this audio or read the transcript in which Ben Lampert interviews Dr. Rory Horner from the University of Manchester about his work arguing for the need to think in terms of Global Development.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2: Rory Horner and Ben Lampert discuss the notion of global development

What arguments does Rory make for thinking in terms of global development?

Discussion

In the twenty-first century, there is a much wider range and diversity of actors involved in development than in the previous century. The divide between the global North and global South is losing relevance. Underdevelopment and inequality exist in all countries. Important current issues such as migration, climate change and poverty are not contained, and cannot be addressed, within the borders of any particular country or continent. Economies are closely interconnected and addressing the challenge of sustainable development is one that all countries face. Global power dynamics are changing with the (re)emergence of rising powers such as China and India. These countries now play increasingly important roles in leading, influencing, and funding development.

7 Complexity and development

Thinking in terms of global development requires dealing with the interconnections and interrelationships between a diverse range of individuals, groups and institutions at a world-wide scale. Poverty, hunger, inequality, injustice, and environmental degradation are all interlinked issues that impact on the health and well-being of many people, and transverse national boundaries. They entail processes that are global in nature, linking many if not all countries around the world, and it is not easy to untangle cause and effect. The reasons for the war in Ukraine in 2022 are linked to its present and past history, to that of neighbouring countries, as well as to that of global politics. The impacts are felt globally. Political alignments change as some countries feel threatened by Russia's actions. Food supplies, especially that of wheat, are affected and prices rise globally due to the interdependence of food supply and economic systems, with the result that poorer countries will suffer most. The dynamic of the present struggles will merge into that history to create new narratives and provide potential drivers of future conflicts.

Even well-intentioned interventions in the lives of others can have unplanned and unintended consequences, even to the extent that the expected benefits of the intervention are not achieved, or worse, the intervention causes negative impacts. The provision of food aid may have mixed effects providing much-needed nourishment to people in times of crisis, yet also undermining local systems of food production and sale. This indicates that the situation is a somewhat more involved and complex one than anticipated.

What are some approaches to understanding the complexity of these global issues? Systems Thinking (ST) offers a critical framework through which to think about issues with many moving parts. The concept of a wicked problem is used to refer to complex situations that give rise to issues of concern. Global issues have all the characteristics of wicked problems.

Such characteristics are that the problems

- involve a wide and diverse range of actors who are interconnected in diverse ways
- involve multiple and partial perspectives
- generate disagreement as to what constitutes a solution because the root causes are unclear
- encompass a wide range of issues that are not easily contained within defined boundaries, and which can reveal a 'chaotic' mix of interrelations
- may be tackled using intervention strategies that have unintended harmful consequences.

ST refers to the traditions and disciplines in which theories, models and techniques relevant to working with complex interconnected situations have been debated and developed. However, it is essentially about a way of thinking and of seeing the world, and of developing skills to work with complexity.

ST skills include

- **Exploring boundaries**: Evaluate who and what has been included in and excluded from any analysis of a situation, and why.
- **Appreciating multiple perspectives**: Understand the different ways in which actors perceive issues and relate to them.
- **Understanding relationships**: Map and explore the multiple networks of inter-connections that exist between actors and factors within and across systems.
- **Thinking in terms of systems themselves**: The whole cannot be fully appreciated from the sum of its parts.

(Midgley 2014)

The language of ST speaks of emergence, improvement, and possibilities. It recognises that the parts can never capture the properties, the magic of the whole. Take a computer apart. You can know the function of every part but unless combined in a certain way, no picture will emerge on your computer screen. You cannot have the picture without the complex interplay of the parts – it doesn't exist outside of them. Movement is a property observed in living and non-living things. You can measure movement and try to define it, yet you cannot hold it in your hand and say exactly what it is made of. It has emerged from a source of energy interacting with a physical entity such as a machine or a body, itself made up of many parts.

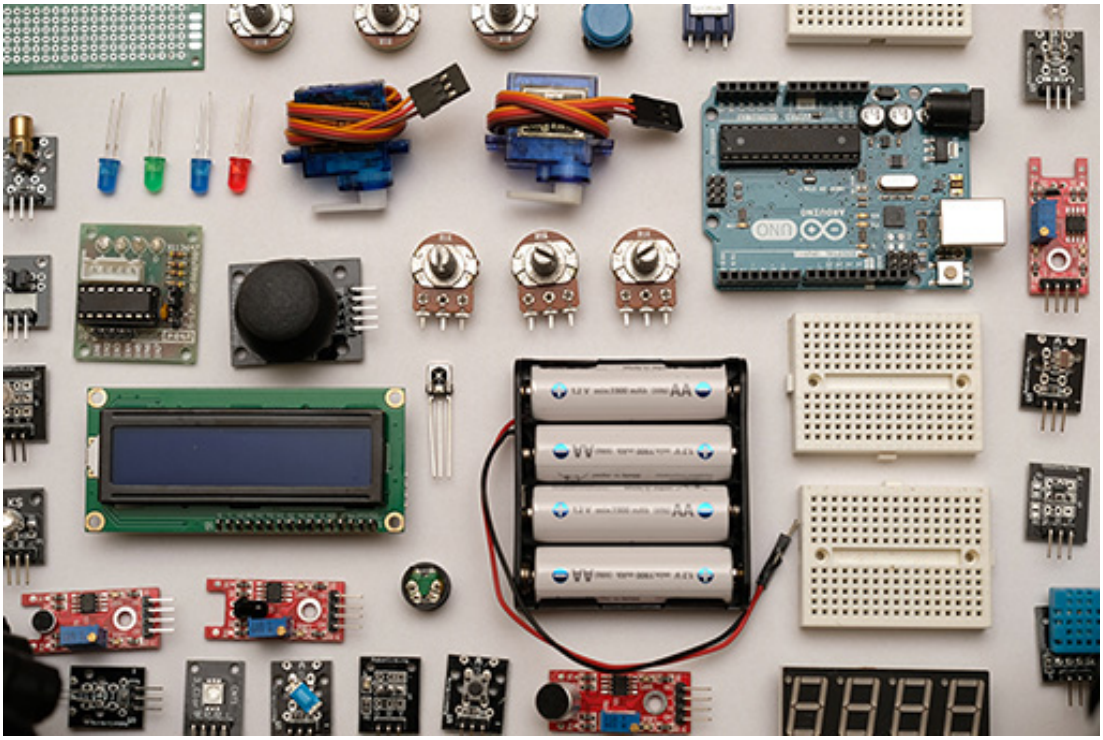

Figure 5: Components

8 Framework for a global development mindset

Thinking systemically requires a both/and mindset. Working with a complex situation requires looking at individual parts of the whole – you cannot deal with everything, so you must draw a boundary somewhere. It is critical to keep a healthy ‘part-whole’ balance, and to work with the parts in such a way as to create an approximation of the whole.

The process of looking at the parts of a problem and breaking it down in order to gain understanding of a larger whole is one that researchers and practitioners continually grapple with. There is always a danger that the dots do not get joined up and valuable insights are not realised at opportune times.

The story of cholera is one where investigators, both past and present, work at different levels of complexity. It took careful detective work and study of the distribution of outbreaks of the disease for the British physician, John Snow, to identify the source of the problem in London in 1854. He did not know what caused the disease, but his findings provided the evidence that led to an effective intervention – removal of an offending water pump.

Figure 6: A map from ‘On the Mode of Communication of Cholera’, 1855 (litho), Snow, John (1813−58)

The causative organism, a bacterium, was identified in 1854 by the Italian physician, Filippo Pacini, although this work was unknown to John Snow (History.com 2020). It took some years before the work of different investigators was brought together and a more complete picture built up of the pathology of cholera and its spread. Taking a step back and looking at the disease organism in its natural setting provokes further questions and inquiry, such as why did a bacterium, which is present widely in coastal habitats and been around for thousands of years, evolve into a virulent strain and go on to cause devastating pandemics (Boucher et al., 2015). Similar questions can be asked regarding the emergence of a new type of coronavirus in 2019 and its spread to become a global pandemic. In gaining a more complete understanding of such situations, it is necessary to isolate the parts and study them in minute detail. It is also essential to look at the parts in context and consider the complex interactions between them and their environment.

In the fields of complexity and ST, a wide range of methodologies, techniques and tools have been developed to support thinking, and in seeking some understanding of complex situations. Such approaches are used by scholars and practitioners in order to reduce the complexity as it is impossible to deal with the whole in any meaningful detail but seek to

maintain an awareness of the bigger picture. A framework is one such conceptual tool, one that gives insights and helps in exploring possibilities. PASH is a conceptual framework developed for the Global Development qualifications offered by The Open University. It brings into juxtaposition four key concepts, Power, Agency, Scale and History (PASH) that are important in making sense of global development and complex global development issues such as poverty, migration and environmental sustainability.

9 The four elements of PASH

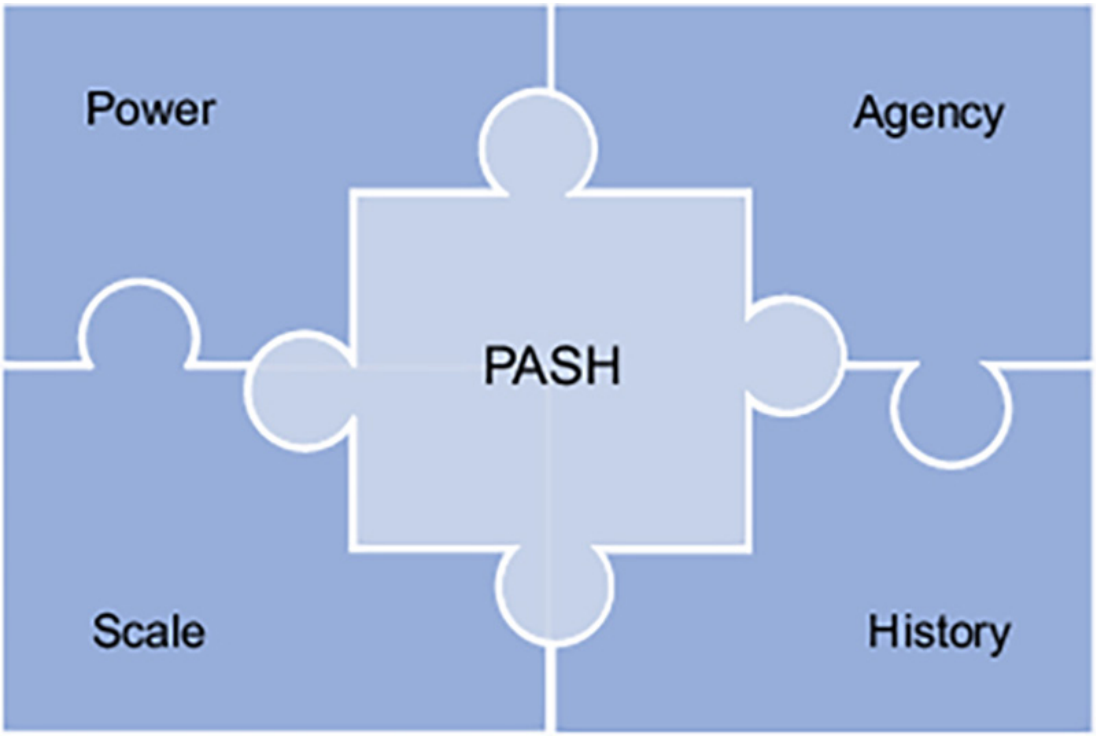

Figure 7: The four conceptual elements of PASH connect and work with one another, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The four conceptual elements of PASH – Power, Agency, Scale and History – offer a useful means of making sense of global development. Together they provide a way to begin to get to grips with complexity, with each element of the framework helping us to develop critical insights into a particular dimension which can then be brought together to build a more comprehensive analysis of a development situation or issue.

Click through the tabs in Figure 8 and learn more about the four concepts: Power, Agency, Scale and History.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 8 (interactive): The four elements of PASH explained

Activity 5: Using PASH in analysing a global issue

Allow 20 minutes

Working with all four elements of PASH simultaneously is a challenge. Consequently, it is advisable to start an analysis of a process or situation by working with each element in turn, identifying what each highlights about the context under examination. It is then important to build on this by explicitly working to identify what further insights can be generated by thinking about how the different elements of PASH can interact in the analysis of a situation.

Box 1 presents the initial thoughts of Richard Pinder, one of the authors on the Open University's Global Development modules, as he attempts to think through the issue of climate change in terms of PASH. Note how Richard uses the ideas of power, agency, scale and history to get an initial grasp on this complex issue. Can you see points in which Richard is thinking with more than one of these ideas together? How does this aid his analysis of the issue?

Box 1: Climate change and PASH

Power is an obvious starting point. Industrialised countries are often seen as the wealthiest and most technologically advanced countries in the world, and it is widely recognised that this often derives from their history of being colonial powers which gave them privileged access to labour and natural resources and enabled them to establish a global ascendency. Therefore, these countries are historically situated in a position of power to shape and dominate the agenda of global negotiations and subsequent targets.

The new polluters, such as the 'rising powers' of China and India, whose economic and political resurgence on the global stage gives them the agency to challenge the established global powers, argue they should not have to compromise their new-found growth and therefore attempt to pass the responsibility back to past polluters.

But what about other actors such as the leaders and ordinary people from industrialised countries, rising powers and developing countries? It is clearly evident that these negotiations affect and reflect the decisions of ordinary people about their consumption and demands.

It will be evident from the actors I have mentioned that this is a story that is being worked out on a number of levels. So, scale is significant. There is certainly a strand of the story evident at the local level due to the individual household and business consumption of resources. Actions at the local level have implications for shaping national policy on climate change. This is reflected in negotiations between governments at the international level and the development of a global agenda for all individuals, communities and nations to pursue. It shows decisions are made, and the impact of these decisions, at different scales, from household and community to the international and global.

Inquiring into global issues such as migration or environmental sustainability requires that you engage with multiple perspectives and approaches. PASH provides a particular framework which acts as a prompt for critically thinking about such complex issues and about global development. You may start by examining power relations and ask how it relates to agency, to scale and to history. Questioning and reflecting in this way helps you in evolving new interpretations and alternative insights.

10 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Taking action to address global development issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, social injustice or food insecurity, requires extensive and sustained levels of cooperation and commitment by actors at many levels of society. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a framework of 17 goals adopted in 2015 by the 193 member states of the United Nations (UN, nd: a) − set out to do just this.

Figure 9: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) set out to be far-reaching, people-centred, sustainable and transformative. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that it established to achieve this provide a focus for collaboration between nations but also allow for diversity in approach. Each country decides what matters most to it and where it will target its energies and resources. Targets and indicators are associated with each goal.

The SDGs are global in the sense that they recognise that contemporary development issues are shaped by, and impact on, all countries, and that all need to be involved in addressing such issues as universal concerns. There is a focus on social transformation associated with achieving social justice through a radical transformation of economic, social, political and cultural systems so that resources are more equitably and sustainably shared. The SDGs cover structural issues such as the causes of poverty and economic inequality; social justice issues such as rights, inclusion and equity; policy issues such as peace, governance and human rights and environmental sustainability issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

The need for coordinated global action is reflected in SDG 17 which calls for a ‘global partnership for sustainable development’ involving not only cooperation between the governments of the world but also the involvement of private sector and civil society actors (https://sdgs.un.org/ goals/ goal17). Such a process is intrinsically political and requires building new relationships, new understandings and new institutions. It is a process of learning to do things differently.

Activity 6: Interconnected SDGs

Allow 25 minutes

Read the list of facts and figures below that is provided on the UN Sustainable Development Goals website (UN, nd; b).

Figure 10: SDG 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all. (Taken from Figure 9.)

Look at Figure 9 which shows all 17 SDG goals or visit the SDG website. What other goals do you see as connecting to goal 6?

- 1 in 4 health care facilities lacks basic water services.
- 3 in 10 people lack access to safely managed drinking water services and 6 in 10 people lack access to safely managed sanitation facilities.
- At least 892 million people continue to practice open defecation.
- Women and girls are responsible for water collection in 80 per cent of households without access to water on premises.
- Between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of the global population using an improved drinking water source has increased from 76 per cent to 90 per cent.
- Water scarcity affects more than 40 per cent of the global population and is projected to rise. Over 1.7 billion people are currently living in river basins where water use exceeds recharge.
- 2.4 billion people lack access to basic sanitation services, such as toilets or latrines.
- More than 80 per cent of wastewater resulting from human activities is discharged into rivers or sea without any pollution removal.
- Each day, nearly 1,000 children die due to preventable water and sanitation-related diarrheal diseases.
- Approximately 70 per cent of all water abstracted from rivers, lakes and aquifers is used for irrigation.
- Floods and other water-related disasters account for 70 per cent of all deaths related to natural disasters.

Bulleted list source: Sustainable Development Goals website:
Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all

Discussion

- Health (SDG 3: *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages*) has obvious links to goal 3 as lack of access to clear water and sanitation impacts on health. The facts and figures show that nearly 1000 children die every day due to water and sanitation-related diseases.
- Poverty (SDG 1: *End poverty in all its forms everywhere*) is implied as well as lack of infrastructure (SDG 9: *Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation*) such as water supply and sewage systems.

- Gender inequality (SDG 5: *Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls*) may be relevant as women and girls often bear responsibility for water collection and are vulnerable when having to practice open defecation.
- Discharge of untreated sewage and untreated wastewater into waterways and the oceans has adverse environmental consequences (SDG 14: *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources)*.
- Justice is relevant (Goal 16: *Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies*) as well as the need for collaboration and partnership (SDG 17: *Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development*) in tackling lack of access to clean water and sanitation.

11 Critiquing the SDGs

It is perhaps not surprising that the SDGs, in attempting to address major global issues, will be imperfect and subject to critique. The effort and work involved in reaching this level of agreement between many very different countries and cultures deserves recognition. Inevitably, achieving consensus imposed limits on the scope of the agenda for sustainable development and involved many compromises.

Activity 7: Experts' opinions

Allow 20 minutes

Watch Video 3, where experts attending the 2019 Development Studies Association (DSA) conference gave their opinions on the limitations of the SDGs. What themes can you identify?

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 3: Critiques of the SDGs: experts' opinions

Discussion

- The SDGs are broad and aspirational. Having a vision is not necessarily a limitation − the SDGs should cover everything and be ambitious. The SDG framework as a whole is good.
- It is unclear if there exists the political will for the degree of action required to achieve them. They are voluntary and lack bite. Implementation of long-term development goals is not compatible with the short-term nature of national political cycles.
- Issues relating to justice, equality and discrimination are not easily captured by such goals and can be easily lost.
- Many of the SDGs relate to economic growth and this is in tension with environmental sustainability.
- There are challenges in reporting and measuring mechanisms.

Critiquing the SDGs in this way is an important part of your learning. Whilst recognising the positive achievements, it is essential to question and delve deeper into the underlying processes.

Positive and distinctive features of the SDGs is that they forge a set of development priorities and indicators that apply to all regions, all nation states and all localities, not just those labelled as ‘poor’ or ‘developing’. Agreement has been reached on these 17 overarching goals but there is ongoing contention over the meaning of the agreed goals, over who should benefit from them, and who is responsible for attaining them (Scoones, 2016).

By adopting a Systems Thinking (ST) approach and examining the SDGs in terms of power, agency, scale and history (PASH), you begin to probe deeper into the complexities of the processes involved. In exploring key criticisms such as those listed below, it is possible to apply a PASH element to each as a starting point and then ask how they relate to the other elements of PASH.

- Power: The SDGs do not go far enough in challenging the status quo. They protect existing political and economic interests that contribute to the very global issues, such as environmental degradation, poverty and inequality, the goals are supposed to address.
- Agency: Many people are excluded by uneven processes of development that are directed by and benefit the most powerful.
- Scale: Even though the SDGs are global in scale, implementation is dependent on national governments and governments can select which SDGs they wish to pursue. There is a danger of losing the bigger picture perspective.
- History: The SDGs are premised on the continuing pursuit of economic growth, which has produced stark social inequalities and damaged the environment.

The power in this case lies with global institutions and corporations which have access to economic resources and political influence. Developed countries are prominent in this although the developed-developing distinction is increasingly blurred with the rising influence of countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). This power dynamic is continually evolving. Agency is an interesting aspect to consider. Technological innovation and the spread of the use of social media gives people from all walks of life a degree of agency. How this impacts at different scales − local, national and global − varies and is somewhat unpredictable. Taking a historical perspective, the link between the SDGs and the efforts of developed countries to set and to lead global development agenda can be recognised.

12 Final words and next steps

You are now reading the end of this Open Learn course in which you were introduced to the concept of global development as a framework for thinking and analysing global issues. The complexity underlying issues such as climate change, migration, social injustice and equality, food insecurity and poverty, require appreciating the interactions and interrelationships between many different actors and factors at multiple levels. Doing this is no easy task and use of conceptual frameworks such as PASH can both aid your analysis and provoke deeper questions.

This is the journey that awaits you should you decide to take your learning further and go on to study the Open University's Global Development modules in full. In doing so, you will extend your knowledge and understanding of global development and the key development issues that face the world presently. You will also develop your critical thinking, analytical and reflective skills, and be well placed to contribute to the changes needed to make the world a better place for all.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course DD870 *Understanding global development*. You might also be interested in the related OpenLearn course, DD871 *Introducing key global development challenges*. To find out more, explore this OpenLearn article, which includes a video explaining what you can expect to learn.

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Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Elizabeth Mc Donnell, in collaboration with the DD870 module team.

Figure 7: The Open University

Figure 8 (interactive): The Open University

Figure 9: The Global Goals Organisation

Figure 10: The Global Goals Organisation

Video 1: The Open University

Video 2: The Open University

Video 3: The Open University

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