

Rise of the Concepts and Indicators of Social Development: Insights from the Experience of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The concept of social development and its measurements and indicators have remained contentious in development and instigated widespread debates and ramifications. Based on an extensive survey of literature and associated secondary sources, this article broadly aims at proffering a critical account of the evolution of the ideas of and discourses on social development from several key theoretical perspectives together with an analysis of the yardsticks of reckoning and fathoming the performance and achievements on the front of social development with a particular reference to the experience of Bangladesh. This paper adopts a document survey to critically analyze and summarize previous research into the historical evolution of social development, drawing insights from the experience of Bangladesh. Several determining factors of social development have emerged over the past few decades to take the social happenings into account in gauging improvements in the quality of human lives. Among these determining factors, education, health, the standard of living, and gender relations are critical to explaining the extent of social development in society. Although Bangladesh has made some salient progress in a few selected fronts of social development, the challenges of ensuring the long-run sustainability of these efforts remain as daunting as ever. The efforts to understand, explore and locate social development within the broader theoretical and conceptual discourses and debates have remained somewhat limited so far. This area of study calls for immediate attention from both academics and practitioners alike.

Keywords: Social development, Organic evolution, Social development indicators, Human well-being, Social development challenges, Bangladesh

Introduction

Of late, social development as a distinct approach to broad-based human development has attracted burgeoning interests and enthusiasm from the relevant academic and practitioners' quarters. Yet, despite its rapidly increasing popularity and usage, the term and connotations of social development defy any universal agreement and are bedeviled with ramifications and contentious

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interpretations. One particularly poignant debate concerns whether the idea of social development is a subject matter of classical sociology or not. While some contend that the conception of social development has grown out of the interest of sociology and lacks established rationale and common reference points (Blumer, 1966; Schaff, 1960), others argue that the notion of social development is essentially rooted in classical sociological interests of social evolution and progress (Stanley, 1967). While, for Parsons (1966), the theory of social development is thought to seek how society adapts to the external environment, differentiates between social actors, and integrates the social orders, Midgley (1995) defines social development as a process of planned social change that promotes human well-being in conjunction with economic progress in the society. The conception of social development thus shares heterogeneous perspectives and is subject to diverse theoretical explanations.

This article is set within the above context, and it pursues a twofold objective: first, the study attempts to make a critical review of dominant perspectives of social development, and secondly, based on selected mainstream indicators, it explores and reckons the state of social development of Bangladesh from such dimensions as the standard of living, education, health, and gender relations. In what follows, the discussion is, in the main, structured in three sections. First, it reviews the ideas of and discourses on social development from several key theoretical perspectives, and second, it explores the yardsticks of reckoning and fathoming the performance and achievements on the fronts of social development. The third section then makes a brief sketch of the social development experiences of Bangladesh based on the selected indicators developed through theoretical analysis in section two. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the progress and challenges in the pursuit of social development in Bangladesh and an exhortation for further research into this interesting study area.

Appraising the ideas of social development

There is a considerable body of debate among scholars on the emergence of social development as a distinct sociological approach to development. Blumer (1966) argues that the idea of social development has no affinity with the three historical concerns of sociology, namely social evolution, social progress, and social change. He further argues that there has neither been any theoretical breakthrough in sociology nor any resetting of research problems to account for the idea of social development. Instead, the idea is considered to be an importation from the fact that economists have set up the problem of economic development by observing a retarded economy among the underdeveloped people, and political scientists are concerned with the problem of political development by noting the struggles of such people to form and operate their states. Therefore, sociologists join the throng of social scientists whose concerns address such a social development problem considering the so-called 'backwardness' of the underdeveloped people. However, the construction of this

problem is essentially not the result of any indigenous formation of the discipline.

As Blumer (1966) argues, sociologists have no theoretical framework nor any agreed-upon set of criteria or established body of knowledge that might address or attempt to analyze the problem of social development. They, by and large, seem to take the concept of social development taken for granted as if it had self-evident meaning and validity, which render them not to perceive the need to identify the generic process or any common criteria of social happenings that are presupposed by the idea of social development. As a result, the conceptualization of social development has become arbitrary among sociologists with vague and inconsistent connotations. For example, some sociologists define social development as eradicating social conditions that hinder economic development, while others concern themselves with the presumed social consequences of economic development. Others treat social development as the elimination of such social problems as crime, slums, and family disruption, while the others identify social development as the incidences of an increase in literacy rate, increase in the level of schooling, sufficient calorie intake, or decrease in infant mortality (Blumer, 1966; Hardiman and Midgley, 1982).

Apart from the above meanings of social development held by different throngs of sociologists, some also viewed and approached social development as synonymous with 'modernization' or the 'westernization of development' (Blumer, 1966, p. 8). Social development, in this regard, is used to refer to the making of 'underdeveloped people' of Africa, Asia, and South America abreast of the developed people of the United States and Western Europe. However, this view of social development, narrowly bound in time and space, gives the concept a very restricted temporal, geographical, and cultural application. The limited scope of this view of social development is due to its focus on specific conceptual standards such as high degree of literacy, improved public schooling, modern sanitation and scientific medical care, high standard of living, good transport system, technological advancement, and democratic rule, which mostly form the characteristics of modern societies. But, as Blumer (1966) and Lehmann (1979) argue, these standards have no relevance to social development as these may occur in multitudes of non-modern societies. Rather, the generalized idea of social development needs to be understood as a generic process of societal formation. As a result, many indigenous developments in underdeveloped countries in terms of societal formation, which are not compatible with the living of developed countries, are not regarded as social development. Therefore, the foundation of social development, as he argues, would have to be sought in the analytical character of human society:

For sociologists, the needed conception of social development would have to be sought in the analytical character of human

society. If the conception is to have a generic form which would allow it to be applied generically to human societies or to social happenings in varied cultures, it would presumably have to be tied to the fundamental abstract makeup of human society. Yet, no one of the abstract conceptions of society currently accepted by sociologists seems to provide any ground for forming a generic conception of social development (Blumer, 1966, p. 6).

Without any uniform and stable understanding, the concept of social development has thus become blurred. While the contenders of the concept of economic development reach a reasonable and fundamental agreement that economic development essentially refers to and define it as increased productivity, accumulation of capital, or increase in real income, sociologists failed to determine similar agreed-upon contents of social development. As a result, understanding social development, unlike economic development, cannot be applied to every human society uniformly to determine whether any particular social happenings contribute to social development since the societal formations constitute the generalized idea of social development varies between societies. It is thus argued by Blumer (1966) and Lehmann (1979) that the conception of social development stems from vague and inadequate background connotations and it lacks established rationale and common reference points.

On the contrary, Stanley (1967) argues that social development is not a new concept; it is rooted in classical sociological concerns of social evolution and progress. The meaning of social development has not grown out of sociology. However, it can also be found in the debate of 'welfare economics' in the economics discipline and the theory of administrative 'functionalism' in the political science discipline. To define social development, he further argues that it is not sufficient to demonstrate only the normative content of social development. However, the isolation of generic normative problems is also necessary to justify a single definition of social development as a policy problem, not a scientific theory or modernization. The normative concept of social development may thus be understood as policy problems that arise from the distributive injustice emanating from complex tendencies toward ideological change, social reorganizational demands, social movements, and social problems.

Stanley (1967) takes the notion of Taylor's (1966) objective meaning of justice in society⁴ to further demonstrate social development as a normative problem. The

⁴ Taylor (1966) makes a classical sociological notion in his distinction between what he calls latent community or community of covenant and manifest community or community of contract. He argues that rights of a person in the community of contract are grounded in the status of the person defined by the community of covenant, such that the equilibrium between persons which subsists before the contract will also subsist after it and the preservation of such equilibrium of persons is the objective meaning of justice in any society.

normative problem of social development arises when the equilibrium of persons, in other words, the orderly redistribution of rights, is disturbed in such a way that a new value claim, or a reinterpretation of an existing one in terms of different norms, enters the society as a foundation of a new conception of distributive justice. This new conception of distributive justice entails the reevaluation of access to resources and becomes the basis for a new definition of rights of the persons in society and thus renders justification for social reorganization. As Stanley (1967) argues, if society is considered in terms of three vertices of a triangle: values, cognitive value system on the nature of reality, and social structure, social reorganization is subject to conflicting interpretations of experience at all three vertices of the triangle.

In the evolution of social development, structural functionalism theory - integrating the notions of Comte's and Spencer's naturalism and Weber's rationalism - posits that society is a system of institutions. Each component of the social system contributes to the operation of the whole. Naturalism argues that the way 'natural science' studies nature is the same as 'social science' - as 'sociology' studies society. It thus finds social institutions and human behavior grounded on natural bases, i.e., humans act based on instinct. On the other hand, rationalism argues that humans can control the world through thought, logic, and calculation, and thus the culture of rationality determines the paths of development. Combining the notions of both naturalism and rationalism and taking Durkheim's 'mechanical and organic solidarity'⁵ into account, structural functionalism thus postulates that the organs of the social system work to promote solidarity and stability (Peet and Hartwick, 2009).

Therefore, in light of the argument of structural functionalism, the conception of social development can be presumed to be based on the socialization of the people through shared beliefs, values, and symbols. Hence, a uniform and stable characterization of the concept of social development may not seem practical to take the processes of socialization in every society into account.

⁵ Durkheim (1983) argues that society develops through maintaining social and moral solidarity within the society. Solidarity is maintained in a society when individuals are integrated into social groups and are regulated by a set of shared values and customs. In order to show how social order is maintained in various types of societies, he points out two types of solidarity – mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. On the one hand, mechanical solidarity, according to Durkheim, exists in traditional cultures with a low division of labor since most members of the society are involved in similar type of occupations and they share common experiences, customs and beliefs. On the other hand, growing industrialization and urbanization lead to complex division of labor and contribute to the breakdown of mechanical solidarity and thus lead to another type of solidarity namely organic solidarity. In the societies that characterized by organic solidarity, as division of labor expands, people become increasingly depended upon one another since no one can meet his or her own needs acting alone. These economic reciprocity and mutual dependency come to replace shared beliefs in creating social consensus.

Durkheim's (1983) ideas of collective conscience or system of shared values that secure order and solidarity in society, and Weber's (1958) notion of rational actions together with an emphasis on ideas and values as catalysts of social change, might be considered as cornerstones toward the point of departure of the sociological theorizing of development. However, Parsons (1948) develops a grand theoretical synthesis known as Parsonian synthesis, putting these two themes together. For Parsons, the study of society is guided by an evolutionary perspective where humans act as an integral part of the organic society, and human culture is analyzable in the general framework of the life process. Human action systems, in other words, societies, according to Parson, respond to four social-functional imperatives that make up the functional basis of social structure. These social-functional imperatives are – adaptation (A), society's generalized adaptation to the conditions of the external environment in terms of deriving and distributing resources through the system; goal attainment (G), establishing goals and mobilizing required social efforts; integration (I), maintaining solidarity through coordinating subsystem preventing disruption; and latency (L), storing and distributing motivational energy through the system involving pattern and tension maintenance. This social structure is briefly called AGIL, which, Parson argues, correlated with the functional requirements of all social and natural systems, and based on which a society exists, it survives and develops.

On the theory of social development, Parsons (1966) argues that social and economic development, like organic evolution, proceeds through variation and differentiation from simple social forms, i.e., hunting and gathering society, to more complex social forms, i.e., industrial societies. This transformation of simple social forms into more complex social forms advances in line with enhancing society's adaptive capacity, as put in the AGIL system, either internally through originating new type of structure or externally through cultural diffusion, i.e., importation of new factors from outside. However, the enhancement of society's adaptive capacity, what Parsons calls 'adaptive upgrading' of the society, essentially involves differentiation – subsystem specializing and dividing, i.e., industry dividing from agriculture and further dividing into different types of industrial production. As a result, societies become better able to cope with their problems and adapt to their environments as each subsystem of society can perform its primary functions. However, the growing social differentiation and the proliferation of specialized components of society cause social disintegration, which needs to be checked by the value system or the cultural pattern that reinforces integration in the social order. Therefore, Parsons argues that adaptation, differentiation, and integration are the themes in which social development is grounded.

In analyzing social development from the Marxist theoretical framework, Schaff (1960) argues that 'change' is the point of departure for the conception of

development that serves to designate a certain type of changes which, with a given frame of reference and scale of measurement, represent a quantitative growth of positive phenomenon under a given system of values. Thus, according to Schaff, the problem of social development can only be examined concretely both in the sense of a socially accepted system of values and concerning the aspect of social life only within a certain frame of reference. However, the meaning of social life is not definite and covers greatly varied patterns of social relations and their effects, i.e., economic, political, and other relations between human beings and science, arts, morals, religion, etc. It, therefore, can be argued that the question of social development, not identifying a concrete sphere of social life with its specific frame of reference, cannot be located and answered correctly. However, Schaff (1960) further argues that it is only reasonable to answer the question of social development without identifying the domain which the question refers to - when it is accompanied by the assumption that, in addition to a connection and interdependence in the various spheres of social life, there also exists a certain hierarchy of influence in social life as a whole. Thus, changes in one link of the chain of mutual connection between spheres of social life, in such hierarchy, cause corresponding changes in other links of this chain due to a longer development, eliminating their mutual dependence and influence. This assumption of the existence of a certain hierarchy constitutes the basis of the Marxist theory of social development in which mode of production determined by the productive forces becomes the basis of social development.

Another perspective of social development that has assumed major significance in international development discourse is Midgley's (1995) conceptualization of social development as a planned social change designed to promote human well-being in conjunction with the dynamic process of economic development. He develops this perspective in contrast to distorted development caused by the disjunction between social and economic advancement, which, as a result, leaves the majority of the population not benefitted by economic development. Rather than seeing human welfare dependent on economic development, he argues, there needs harmonization between planned social changes and economic progress to create resources for society. For proper harmonization of social and economic development to foster human well-being in society, the ideas of unified socio-economic development planning and productivist social programs, i.e., human capital formation, mobilization of social capital, employment generation, and economic participation by prominent economists like Myrdal (1953), Singer (1964), Higgins (1956), and Sen (1999), need to be taken into account of national development planning (Midgley, 1997).

Reckoning social development

A plethora of indicators that measure the social dimensions of development exists in development literature. All developments center around the idea of ensuring human well-being in society, so does social development as the above theoretical analyses of social development, whether a subject matter of

sociology or not, posit. Thus, the variability of identifying social development indicators is essentially subject to how human well-being is defined. Two dominant approaches, namely the 'basic needs' approach developed in the 1970s (ILO, 1976; Seers, 1972) and Sen's 'capabilities' approach (Sen, 1993), play a significant role in determining human-wellbeing indicators. On the one hand, the basic needs approach emphasizes access of the poor to certain basic goods and services while only income may not seem necessary or sufficient for their provision. On the other hand, the capabilities approach sees development as expanding choices available to individuals or capabilities. Capabilities for individuals to lead a good life, Sen (1993) suggests, are adequate nourishment, leading a long and healthy life, literacy, and shelter. However, the ability of individuals to participate in society is influenced by other factors like gender, race, which are also important determinants of human capabilities.

The commonality of the basic needs approach and capabilities approach is that they emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of human well-being. Apart from these two approaches, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1990 developed a composite index named Human Development Index (HDI) to measure development across the countries, maintaining the multi-dimensional nature of human welfare through three dimensions: a long and healthy life, literacy, and decent standard of living in terms of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. Although HDI has now become widely accepted in measuring social development across the countries, the current focus of social development index in developing countries has been at three levels – (i) individual level, which looks at nutritional intake, measures of health, education, employment, and income; (ii) household level, that examines income, assets, and fertility; and (iii) community level, that reports data on crime, drugs, infrastructure and services, community and planning, and governance (Harkness, 2004). Meanwhile, more recent indicators of social development, Harkness argues, include such dimensions as social cohesion, social exclusion, and social capital.

Social development in Bangladesh: The pathways and challenges

Born in 1971 in the aftermath of a war-ravaged institutional and physical capital and acute food shortage during the subsequent years, Bangladesh has experienced phenomenal achievements in its economic and social developments. With progressive policies and innovative institutions, Bangladesh has made exemplary accomplishments, particularly in social development. With sustained growth of gross domestic product (GDP) and food production, the country has been able to reduce its poverty headcount ratio from 61.3 percent in 1981 to 24.3 percent in 2016 and raise GNI per capita from US\$ 649 in 1980 to US\$ 1940 in 2019 (World Bank, 2020a; UNDP, 2020). Concerning social development, Bangladesh has successfully increased life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, decreased birth rate, increased immunization, improved child nutrition, improved reproductive health, increased girls' education with overall primary

and secondary enrolments, and gender equality. The pathways of social development in Bangladesh are presented in the following sections taking these social development indicators into account.

Bangladesh has achieved the fastest rate of decline in infant mortality and child mortality among the developing countries. Infant mortality declined from 140 in 1972 to 26 in 2019 per thousand infants (World Bank, 2020b). Meanwhile, the life expectancy at birth has increased from 55.2 years in 1980 to 72.6 years in 2019 (UNDP, 2020). However, the maternal mortality ratio remains a major problem because of the prevalence of childbirth at home without proper healthcare, although it has slightly decreased from 4.44 per 1000 live births in 1996 to 1.73 per 1000 live births in 2017 (World Bank, 2020c). The country has shown tremendous success in bringing down the fertility rate from 6.3 per woman in 1975 to 2 in 2019, bringing about a decline in the annual population growth rate to 1 percent per annum (World Bank, 2020d). In addition, there has been considerable improvement in the status of children's nutrition. The composition of the food bundle consumed by poor children has improved during the 1990s, which improved the nutritional status of children across the country. Statistics show that underweight children in Bangladesh have decreased from 56.3 percent in 1996 to 22.6 percent in 2019 (World Bank, 2020e).

Bangladesh has achieved impressive success by expanding gross enrolment in primary school from 72 percent in 1980 to 114 percent in 2018. As a proportion of total primary school enrollment, girls' enrolment increased from 37 percent in 1980 to 51 percent in 2018 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). However, the net enrolment of girls in primary education has also increased from 60.5 percent in 1990 to 98 percent in 2018 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This significant expansion of girls' enrolment in primary education indicates the elimination of gender disparity in education. Apart from this success, Bangladesh still has a higher dropout rate in the primary education. However, the dropout rate in primary education has decreased from 47.2 percent in 2005 to 18.6 percent in 2018 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Although Bangladesh has achieved a significant expansion in enrollment, quality of education has become a significant concern in recent years. A report shows that one-third of those who have completed five years of primary education are without literacy skills, and it takes ten years of schooling to ensure that a population group is fully literate (Ahluwalia and Hussain, 2004).

The pathways of social development of Bangladesh may be characterized by the significant role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The NGOs work in almost every sphere of social development in the country – relief and rehabilitation, poverty alleviation, health, education, and social and environmental protection. Particularly, NGOs have strengthened the gender relationships in the country through creating employment and income-generating activities opportunities for women. The microcredit

programs of NGOs enabled the women to have bargaining power in their families and society (Mahmud, 2008). In addition to that, the phenomenal growth of the garment industry in Bangladesh has become a stimulus to women's employment in the country. Moreover, the concept of gender budgeting has been introduced since the fiscal year 2006-2007 in the government budgeting system in the country to shape government policies to address women's needs and achieve gender equality. However, besides these apparent successes in building a strong gender relation in Bangladesh through employment opportunities for women, gender disparity tends to persist in both income and human poverty (Ahluwalia and Hussain, 2004).

So far, the social development trajectories in Bangladesh show no sustainable and comprehensive advancement in any social indicator of development. The country's social development does not even assume either of Sen's two approaches to social development: 'income-mediated' and 'support-led' (Sen, 1999). On the one hand, the former does not hold in Bangladesh's social development since the growth of the country's economy has not been able to reduce its poverty and income inequality and facilitate a better standard of living and better provision of social services across the country. On the other hand, the latter does not also characterize the pathways of social development in Bangladesh as the social welfare programs of the country have not become successful in checking the social underdevelopment like maternal mortality, dropout from and quality of education, powerlessness of women, disaster mismanagement, etc. It is, therefore, important to note that the government has to rethink the effectiveness and outcomes of its social and economic policies that failed to bring out expected developments in the country.

Conclusions

The idea of social development has mainly remained contentious. While some argue that social development is essentially not a subject matter of classical sociology, others view the concept and trace its roots within the broader remit of classical sociology. Although there is no uniform and stable conception of social development in terms of social theorizing of development, there is a general agreement that social development explains the social happenings and strides that cause human well-being in society. As a result, different determining factors of social development have emerged to take the social happenings into account to identify and fathom the improvements in the quality of human lives. Among these determining factors, education, health, the standard of living, and gender relation are some of the major ones that explain the extent of social development in society. When viewed in light of these determining factors or indicators of social development in Bangladesh, the country manifests and records impressive strides in economic performance, health, education, and gender relations over the last two decades. However, despite the considerable social developments in terms of these indicators, the country still faces a multitude of challenges,

including inefficiency in running effective socio-economic planning, which, in turn, may aggravate such social underdevelopment as a child and maternal mortality, dropout from primary education, violence against women, disruption in social values and customs and leave the already achieved development unsustainable. In sum, although Bangladesh has made some notable progress in a few selected fronts of social development, the challenges of ensuring the long-run sustainability of these efforts and distributive equity remain as daunting as ever. Besides, the efforts to understand, explore and locate social development within the broader theoretical and conceptual discourses and debates have also remained somewhat limited so far. This exciting area of study calls for immediate attention from both academics and practitioners alike.

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