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# New Directions for the Sociology of Development

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## Abstract

At the close of World War II, “development” began to evolve along two paths. On the first path, scholars aimed to generate theoretical understandings of social change, especially at the national level (development studies). On the second path, policy makers in governments and other development-focused organizations initiated actions to promote positive social change (development practice). In this article, we review the recent trajectory of development scholarship in sociology, paying close attention to the intersections between development studies and development practice. Through explicit comparisons to economics and political science, we demonstrate how the prominence of development sociology has varied historically in relation to its proposed policy prescriptions. We conclude by highlighting five uniquely sociological contributions that could powerfully improve contemporary interdisciplinary development conversations, and by calling for greater sociological attention to the complex ways in which a growing transnational field of development practitioners is shaping a multiplicity of development outcomes.

## INTRODUCTION

Why are some countries poorer than others, and what can be done to raise the standard of living for everyone? At the close of World War II, scholars and policy makers alike became intently focused on answering these questions. Finding the answers, they believed, would help prevent future wars and stop the spread of communism—an ideology that was thought particularly attractive to the poorest of the world's citizens. Identifying the determinants of national development also made good economic sense: The United States's postwar technological and industrial dominance could generate larger profits only if US companies could access a growing international consumer market. As a result, the field of “development” was born.

From the beginning, development evolved along two paths. On the first path, scholars aimed to generate theoretical understandings of social change, especially at the national level. Development became a new and central subfield across most social science disciplines, as well as an integral part of many schools of public policy. On the second path, politicians and citizens residing outside the ivory tower began new initiatives to promote positive social change through action, especially by rebuilding war-torn Europe and reducing human misery in developing nations. Several big players operating along this second path—intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) (such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) and massive international nongovernmental development organizations (INGOs) (such as World Vision, Oxfam, and CARE)—were founded during this same postwar period. Development thus evolved with a distinctly dual character: It is both something that academics study and something that practitioners do (see Hart 2001 for a similar distinction between “little d” and “big D” development).

Over the following decades, scholarly theories varied in their assessments of whether and how practitioners could shape the development process. Some scholars thought interventions were futile. Others believed interventions useful, but disagreed on which kinds of interventions should be made and which actors should make them. Still others focused on describing development problems without implying or proscribing development solutions, or located the cause of development disparities in some factor—such as national geographic location or colonial histories—that defied any clear corrective policy.

Meanwhile, development practitioners, located in governments and in tens of thousands of development organizations, became their own diverse field of actors, united by common goals, shared narratives, and recently, a growing consensus about the best practices for effecting development gains in poor nations (on fields, see Fligstein & McAdam 2012). Practitioners frequently design their development interventions on the basis of scholarly theory and evidence. Over the last few decades, economics has enjoyed unparalleled influence in determining practitioner interventions, often at the expense of research in other social sciences.

In this article, we review the recent historical trajectory of development scholarship in sociology, drawing explicit comparisons to development studies' corresponding trajectories in economics and, to a lesser extent, political science. (Space constraints force us to narrow our scope to contemporary rather than classic contributions.) Our article focuses on how sociologists' analyses of development have intersected with the actions of development practitioners. We find that sociologists were initially central figures in the interdisciplinary field of development, but that the relative impact of their contributions to development practice declined significantly in the 1980s, particularly in Western development institutions. By the 1990s, many sociologists were addressing development-like questions under rubrics other than development. We suggest that this dispersion of development-like questions to other sociological subfields had deleterious consequences both for development studies and for sociology. Nevertheless, development as a topic in its own right once again seems to be gaining prominence in sociology. We conclude our review by analyzing



these new directions in sociology and summarizing five uniquely sociological contributions that will powerfully extend and strengthen current understandings of development—as both process and practice—in today’s world.

## DEFINING “DEVELOPMENT”

To date, the scholarly definition of development has been elusive. Modernization theorists were among the most comprehensive and explicit, if ethnocentric, in defining the end goal of development. They characterized modern societies as those that take on the social, political, cultural, and economic features of Western societies, focusing especially on the existence of highly specialized, differentiated, and sometimes technologically sophisticated institutions (e.g., schools, media, and parliaments, as well as an industrialized economy). Dependency and world system scholars typically envisioned development as economic growth. More recently, economist Amartya Sen (1985) promoted a capabilities definition of development, arguing that an ideal society would provide individuals with both the freedom and the opportunity to choose a lifestyle they value.

In this article, we adopt Pritchett et al.’s (2013) vision of development, as we believe it best captures the breadth of proposed social change implied by the term in both academic and policy circles. Pritchett et al. define development as a transformational vision of entire countries, where transformation is sought across the four dimensions of polity, economy, social relations, and public administration. More specifically, ideally developed societies would have political systems that represent the aggregate preferences of citizens, economic systems that grow through enhanced productivity, social relations that fairly extend rights and opportunities to all individuals, and public organizations that function according to meritocratic standards and professional norms (Pritchett et al. 2013, p. 2). To this we would add that ideally developed states would provide at least the minimum necessary social protections, including health care, public infrastructure, education, food security, employment support, and legal and judicial protections from discrimination and abuse, required by its population to maximize their capabilities.

Nevertheless, scholarly articles to date often choose to operationalize rather than define level of development. Nations are ranked as more or less developed according to any of several common measures, including GDP per capita, child mortality levels, average life expectancy, average educational attainment, or the United Nation’s Human Development Index, among others. The unit of analysis is almost always the nation state, but especially within area studies, subnational data are sometimes utilized. Although we know little about how well these measures reflect the on-the-ground reality of individuals, taken together, their use suggests that development scholarship is in spirit fundamentally concerned with explaining the cross-societal, and sometimes intrasocietal, variation in either economic growth or human quality of life and especially how that variation changes over time.

## EARLY SOIOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Prior to the 1980s, sociological ideas figured prominently in both development theory and development practice. Modernization theory, which assumed that all nations were converging on an evolutionary path to an increasingly ideal society, drew heavily from sociological conceptions of functionalism (Parsons 1964) and stratification (Moore 1963). Modernization scholars advocated the exportation of capital, technology, and Western education to poor nations as a primary means of accelerating development processes—practices that were embodied in such entities as US President Harry S. Truman’s Point Four Program, the US Agency for International Development, and the Peace Corps.



Sociologists were especially foundational to the development of dependency (e.g., Cardoso & Faletto 1979, Evans 1979, Frank 1969) and world system theories (e.g., Chase-Dunn 1975, Wallerstein 1974). Broadly speaking, these theories argued that poor nations occupied a structurally disadvantaged position in a global capitalist system; poor, or “peripheral,” nations failed to develop because the surplus they generated from their own productive resources was appropriated by the capitalist centers at the “core.” The agents of this exploitation were the multinational corporations. Whereas the most radical of these scholars advocated that peripheral states exit capitalist exploitation through global socialist revolution (Frank 1969, Wallerstein 1974), other scholars in this field proposed that developing states could creatively industrialize some aspects of their economies, even from their disadvantaged position, typically by supporting carefully selected national industries with state resources and protections from international competition. Eventually, these industries were expected to grow sufficiently successful to compete independently in the global market. Referred to as ISI, or import substitution industrialization, this strategy was adopted by a number of Latin American nations in the 1970s (Cardoso & Faletto 1979, Evans 1979). Sociologists in this era also helped broaden development studies away from its narrow focus on national economic growth by putting key social cleavages such as class (Portes 1978, 1983; Roberts 1979) and gender (Blumberg 1984, Elson & Pearson 1981) into the discussion.

### WASHINGTON’S “CONSENSUS” AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT SOCIOLOGY

Yet by the 1980s, sociology’s prominence in development studies seemed to be in decline (Gereffi 1989, Portes & Kincaid 1989). This decline corresponded with a striking change in the global context. With the prominent exception of the East Asian tigers, most of the developing world was hit by debt crises and market failures in the 1980s. The causes of these crises are multiple, complex, and in many ways historically specific. Nevertheless, when coupled with the rise of Reagan- and Thatcher-era politics, these crises gave credence to a conservative branch of development economics that argued that mainstream development practice based on state-protected industries had contributed to economic failure by creating inefficient markets and burgeoning debt. (Of course, debt crises were also generated by the soaring inflation rates created when OPEC’s petrodollars flooded the global market.) These economists encouraged developing-country governments to foster economic growth by opening their markets to foreign direct investment (FDI) and increasing their participation in the global economy.

The result was a so-called Washington Consensus. In this article, we use the term Washington Consensus to reflect its present-day usage, and acknowledge that the term now embodies meanings far beyond those included in its initial formulation (Williamson 2008). In general, in the 1980s policy makers were thought to have reached a “consensus” that national economies would grow fastest if markets were freed from state manipulation. State protection of local industry, as advocated under ISI, was thought problematic because it would corrupt the market’s natural ability to exploit its comparative advantage. State protections were also thought problematic because poor nations’ governments were considered bloated, corrupt bureaucracies that siphoned off the benefits of economic investments for the political elite. The Consensus concluded that the primary economic role of governments in developing nations was to remove restrictions on imports, eliminate trade barriers, devalue currency, and lower taxes to make themselves more attractive to foreign investors. This would naturally attract investments of global capital and technology and cause economies to expand.

The deepening debt of developing nations also gave international development organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund unprecedented power to shape

economic policies in developing nations. These organizations typically required developing nations to adopt various “structural adjustment programs” prior to receiving new loans or as preconditions to getting their current loans restructured. Although adjustment agreements varied by nation and transformed over time, most were designed to discipline developing nations’ fiscal policies, reduce public spending (often by eliminating subsidies for the purchase of food staples or for local industrial development), broaden the tax base, devalue currency to improve foreign exchange rates, privatize state-run enterprises, and open the economy to foreign trade and capital investments (on the emergence of this Consensus, see Babb 2005, Serra & Stiglitz 2008, Toye 1993). The dominance of a free market ideology among policy makers and economics departments in the 1980s was irrefutable. Indeed, according to one economist,

The superior economic performance of countries that establish and maintain outward-oriented market economies subject to macroeconomic discipline is essentially a positive question. The proof may not be quite as conclusive as the proof that the Earth is not flat, but it is sufficiently well established as to give sensible people better things to do with their time than to challenge its veracity. (Williamson 1993, p. 1,330, as quoted in Gore 2000)

The Washington Consensus marked a sharp transformation from earlier development scholarship in at least three ways. First, prior to the 1980s, most development theory, including modernization and some dependency theories, allowed that states could be important actors in the pursuit of national development (Babb 2005). In contrast, the Washington Consensus reflected a common core of wisdom that states’ only role in development should be to ensure the free reign of the market. Second, prior to the 1980s, all development theory had emphasized the role of history in shaping national development paths. The Washington Consensus, in contrast, was strikingly ahistorical, measuring a nation’s contemporary economic performance as an outcome of its contemporary economic policies and practices (Gore 2000). Third, prior to the 1980s, best practices in development often had been characterized by interdisciplinary discussions. In contrast, the development policies pursued by national governments in the 1980s were promoted almost exclusively by economists (Woolcock & Kim 2000), although some political scientists, such as Bates (1981), were key to establishing how bloated state bureaucracies and political corruption prevented developing economies from growing. With the exception of “gender and development” specialists, the absence of sociologists from advisory positions in governmental or intergovernmental development institutions became especially acute.

Dynamics internal to the sociology of development also likely accounted for its declining influence in interdisciplinary discussions. For one thing, world system theory, the dominant paradigm in the sociology of development in the 1980s, lost credibility when Firebaugh (1992), a sociologist, found that the measure of FDI commonly used by world system theorists had been wrongly interpreted; FDI actually led to increased, not decreased, economic growth in developing nations. Although Kentor (1998) later demonstrated that FDI’s initial positive effect on economic growth becomes negative over the long-term, world system theory never fully regained its prominence within the discipline. More generally, once world system theory had set the unit of analysis at the level of a unified, global system, it ironically constrained its own ability to evolve. As Portes (1997) notes:

The pursuit of national ‘competitiveness’ within an increasingly bound global economy is consonant with the world-system approach and places this perspective in a theoretically privileged position to analyze current trends. Yet by its resolute focus on long-term historical evolution, this school has failed to capitalize on that advantage. The postulate of a single universal unit of analysis is a major weakness since the level at which most development problems, dilemmas, and decisions take place is



the intermediate one of nations and communities seeking to cope with the constraints of their particular situations. Hence, paradoxically, the sociological perspective that came closest to prediction of present trends has become marginal to specific policy strategies designed to cope with them. (p. 233)

## THE DISPERSAL OF DEVELOPMENT SOCIOLOGY

Despite an apparent decline in the prominence of development sociology in the 1990s, development-like questions about the form, causes, and consequences of cross-national political and economic inequality nevertheless continued to be addressed under alternative rubrics. For example, political sociologists frequently included development as a causal factor in their analyses of changing political regimes and state institutions both in Latin America (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992) and in Asia (Walder 1994). Meanwhile, economic sociologists continued to study economies of the poor, often focusing on the movement of labor, the growth of the informal economy, and the broader relationship between development and inequality (Nielson & Alderson 1995, Portes et al. 1994).

Yet most development sociology seemed to transform into analyses of globalization or transnationalism. Globalization's rise in popularity among sociologists was in many ways a natural outgrowth of development scholars' insistence on a world system of capitalist production (see Brady et al. 2007 for a recent review of the globalization literature). Some sociologists studied the globalization of the economy. Gereffi (1996), for example, argued that global commodity chains have become the key organizers of the economy and that analyzing the spatial diffusion of production allows scholars to understand why some states (but not others) gain the right to manufacture some specific products (but not others) within a single commodity chain. Similarly, Alderson & Beckfield (2004) demonstrated how connections between "world cities" are shaping the distribution processes of increasingly global markets. Other scholars studied the globalization of politics, arguing that a new world polity, composed largely of an expanding and interconnected population of intergovernmental (or multilateral) organizations, distributes policy scripts and rights discourses to their member states, resulting in the diffusion of a new system of global norms and the emergence of an increasingly accepted global culture (Meyer et al. 1997). These scholarly analyses overlapped with development literature because they sought to map and understand the distribution of power and resources across increasingly global political and economic systems. Nevertheless, the questions most fundamental to development scholarship—questions about how national systems can be transformed to improve the capabilities of those living within them—faltered.

The dispersion of development-related questions to other subfields, such as globalization, was problematic for at least two reasons. First, perhaps because 1990s sociologists seldom framed themselves as development scholars, they became relatively marginalized from development policy discussions. As a result, practitioners lost a particularly valuable lens for understanding and addressing development problems. Second, because development questions dispersed to other subfields, sociology lacked the intellectual space required for development scholars to come together and investigate how multiple social institutions and processes—including politics, markets, states, migration, families, poverty, civil society, globalization, and the massive development sector itself—operate in conjunction with each other to shape the direction and intensity of social change both within and across nations.

### DEVELOPMENT SOCIOLOGY IN THE 1990s: TWO PROMINENT EXCEPTIONS

Although development sociology as a subfield appeared to lose centrality during the 1990s, there were at least two prominent exceptions to this trend. First, sociologists were central players in

interdisciplinary scholarship that argued for a return of state analyses to studies of development. In a highly influential book, Peter Evans (1995) argued that states' actions always play a role in economic transformations. As a result, scholars should not ask how much states intervene, but rather what kinds of interventions generate the desired outcomes. Moreover, Evans demonstrated that the kinds of actions states can take are limited by the historically produced institutions already in place. By comparing carefully selected cases of predatory and developmental states, Evans concluded that states have the best development outcomes when they balance autonomy (the ability of states to pursue national goals independently of private interests) and embeddedness (the ability of states to maintain social ties with constituent groups). He further argued that achieving a successful balance between embeddedness and autonomy is a dynamic process. When states succeed in producing a change, such as successful industrialization, they also produce new constituent groups with new interests, new identities, and new claims against the state. Developmental states must therefore also develop embedded ties with these new constituent groups in order to continually reinvent themselves as developmental states. In contrast, stagnant predatory states are much less likely to produce new mobilizations and much more likely to stay embedded through personal ties with historical elites whose aim is to pursue only their own goals.

Second, although still largely ignored by mainstream development scholars, questions of gender and development thrived among sociologists in the 1990s. Prior to this period, scholars had written with the specific intention of bringing first women (women in development, e.g., Boserup 1970) and then gender (gender and development, e.g., Moser 1989) into the theorizing, design, and implementation of development projects and into the policies and institutional arrangements of states and development organizations (see Jaquette & Staudt 2006 for review). Perhaps not surprisingly given its feminist roots, gender and development scholarship has throughout its evolution remained both highly interdisciplinary and highly engaged with development practice. It has also been especially sensitive to how variations in local cultural and political contexts shape women's possibilities for social advancement (Moghadam 1993, 1998). Feminist development scholars have powerfully demonstrated how factors outside the economy, such as patriarchy and religious fundamentalism, can critically block the development of individual capabilities and economic growth (Feldman 2001; Moghadam 1993, 1998). And feminist scholars demonstrated how women's expanding participation in civil society provided a powerful counterforce to neoliberal and state practices, especially as the more traditionally masculine labor parties and unions declined in power (Hite & Viterna 2005, Safa 1990, Seidman 1999), making them among the first to document the importance of social mobilization to resisting globalization processes.

In part because women contributed a higher proportion of their income to family subsistence, and in part because of the growing attention scholars had brought to the feminization of poverty and the increasing levels of female-headed households (Chant 1995), women became the favored recipients of many development projects in the 1990s, such as microfinance lending, child nutrition, educational attainment, and vocational trainings (Jaquette & Staudt 2006; K.M. Fallon & J. Viterna, unpublished manuscript). Nevertheless, gender remains remarkably absent from so-called mainstream theories of development despite compelling arguments for why integrating gender analyses would clarify and strengthen scholarly arguments about the world system (Ward 1993), institutional arrangements (Goetz 1997), and changing class structures (Hite & Viterna 2005).

Development sociology may have occupied a much narrower slice of the discipline in the 1990s than in previous decades, but the two lines of scholarship that expanded throughout the decade nevertheless pushed the field in powerful new directions. Together, these two sets of scholarship insisted that states, institutional histories, and social inequalities were critical components of



development—arguments that foreshadowed the change that development scholarship would take in other disciplines by the turn of the twenty-first century.

### DECLINE OF THE CONSENSUS

By the end of the 1980s, market fundamentalism was coming under attack from at least four fronts. The first challenge arose from practitioners working with major development organizations such as the United Nations. They documented how the quality of life of the poorest populations in developing nations had worsened significantly since the introduction of economic liberalization and structural adjustment, and they called for a new “sustainable human development” (Cornia et al. 1987). Coupled with Sen’s (1985) capabilities approach, proponents of sustainable human development argued that the ultimate test of any development policy should be that it improved people’s lives. Although careful to never suggest a causal link between restructuring and increasing poverty, sustainable human development advocates rejected top-down policies focused exclusively on improving macro-level economic growth, and argued for the addition of bottom-up development practices, developed in partnership with poor nations, that paid primary attention to poverty alleviation. Of note, most mainstream economists did not see the sustainable human development approach as a rejection of structural adjustment, but rather as a call for modifying a programmatic shortcoming (Hart 2001). By 1999, even the World Bank (1999, p. 6) stated that good macroeconomic policies needed to also protect the “worst off” populations in developing nations.

The second challenge came from activists, sociologists, and an interdisciplinary group of feminist scholars. Like the critics above, these scholars documented a worsening quality of life in developing nations. But unlike the above critics, these scholars did theorize a direct causal link between structural adjustment programs and increased human hardship. Whereas ISI-era policies had increased employment and improved living standards, the restructuring and liberalization of the 1980s reversed these gains by worsening unemployment levels, decreasing jobs in both industrial and public sectors, lowering minimum wages, and curtailing any historical political power of labor unions and parties (Oliveira & Roberts 1994, Portes & Hoffman 2003, Tardanico 1997). Moreover, states were arguably incentivized to continually lower minimum wages and eliminate fair labor practices in order to increase their attractiveness to multinational corporations searching a global market for the cheapest, most docile labor forces, launching what many activists have dubbed a race to the bottom.

These changing labor conditions were thought detrimental particularly to women. Increasing poverty forced many more women into the paid labor market, typically into the poor-quality, poorly paid jobs of the informal sector or export-manufacturing factories (Hite & Viterna 2005, Roberts 1995, Tardanico 1997, Ward & Pyle 1995). Women’s historically low cultural status in many developing regions combined with their increasing vulnerability to poverty under structural adjustment to powerfully limit women’s possibilities for organizing on behalf of better wages or fair working conditions. As a result, women became a cheap and easily controlled labor force for export-oriented factories (Fernandez-Kelly 1994). Women’s rapidly increasing participation in the labor force (in both formal and informal economies) was further accompanied by women’s increasing labor in the home. Women became shock absorbers for poor households, making up for structural-adjustment-mandated state reductions in public services by stretching food, taking over health care provision, increasing time spent on child care, and often increasing the number of dependents in the home, new tasks that feminist scholars have sometimes referred to as a third shift required of women in developing nations (Afshar & Dennis 1992, Benería & Feldman 1992, Blumberg et al. 1995, Collier 1989).

A third challenge was launched against the Washington Consensus when political scientist Chalmers Johnson (1982) and economist Alice Amsden (1989) demonstrated how Japan and South Korea, respectively, had systematically violated neoliberal orthodoxy to achieve their impressive developmental gains. Their claims were quickly reinforced and extended by Evans (1995), Wade (1990), and others, but were initially resisted by World Bank policy makers (Hart 2001). Nevertheless, the 1997 crash of the East Asian tigers, in conjunction with continuing calls from prominent scholars in the Global South to prioritize “strategic state integration” (ECLAC 1990, ESCAP 1990), resulted in most “consensus” economists’ increasing willingness to accept the state as a necessary player in regulating economic development by the end of the decade (Evans 1997).

A fourth powerful challenge arose after the Soviet Union fell in 1989. The postsocialist economies in Eastern Europe and Russia tried to rapidly dismantle their state-planned economies and implement market-driven capitalism through a shock therapy approach. Quickly ridding the new capitalist economies of socialist-era inefficiencies was expected to lead to rapid economic growth (e.g., Kornai 1990), but instead, these nations’ initial market growth was weak, especially when compared with the exceptional growth achieved by China and its gradual, controlled dismantling of a centrally planned economy (Whyte 2009). China clearly demonstrates that economic growth and social development are not antithetical to maintaining heavy-handed state control over significant areas of the market (see Whyte 2009 for further analysis).

## DEVELOPMENTS IN ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

These 1990s challenges to the Washington Consensus expanded development economics and development political science into several new directions by the 2000s. Just as the global unit of analysis led to the stagnation of world system theory, so did the ahistorical, one-size-fits-all approach under the Washington Consensus give way to scholarship that advocated historically based, national level analyses that took into account the lived experiences of communities. The big debates about the merits of aid, the impact of globalization, the importance of trade, and the primary causes of poverty continued, but they were joined by new questions about how institutions, social divisions, human capital, and targeted interventions affected economic growth and human development.

New institutional economics is one of the most prominent burgeoning fields of development scholarship in economics and political science. According to these scholars, all economic activity is enacted through systems of social and legal norms, or institutions [Furubotn & Richter 2005 (1997)]. Perhaps the most prominent example, Acemoglu et al. (2001, 2002) conclude that economic development requires inclusive political institutions that protect individual rights, secure property, and encourage entrepreneurship, thus promoting growth. They contrast inclusive states with those historically governed by extractive institutions, which concentrate power in the hands of a few. Acemoglu et al. (2001, 2002) trace institutional quality back to the time of European colonization, and they measure institutional quality using the instrumental variable of colonizer mortality. They theorize that where colonists did not die in high numbers, they settled in the colonies over the long-term and thus created inclusive institutions. In contrast, colonizers did not elect to settle in colonies where they died in high numbers, often owing to climate and topography. In these regions, colonizers extracted the maximum number of resources possible prior to returning to Europe, thus incentivizing the creation of extractive institutions.

The institutional turn in economics and political science provides an important correction to the ahistoricism and market fundamentalism of the previous decades. Nevertheless, scholars have questioned this field’s tendency to look for a silver bullet that aims to explain all development over time and across the globe. Engerman & Sokoloff (2008), for example, agree that institutions matter



but add that institutions are dynamic products of changing political, economic, and geographic environments. Other scholars (Mahoney 2010, Whyte 2009) challenge the primacy of private property as the key institution for economic development. Indeed, whereas scholars in this field almost exclusively study institutions of the state, certainly any number of other institutions—such as the institution of family, the institution of religion, and so on—are also critical to development processes. Finally, though most development scholars contrast institutions with culture, Patterson (2013, 2014) reminds us that institutions, which he defines as durable structures of knowledge that define the rules and expectations of recurrent behaviors, are “thoroughly cultural” (Patterson 2014, p. 1.14). To fully exploit our understanding of how institutions affect development, then, scholars are increasingly eschewing one-size-fits-all explanations and calling for more in-depth analyses of the different functions, forms, and practices of institutions as they vary over time and across nations.

Another major transformation in twenty-first-century economic development scholarship occurred within the field of microeconomics (Rodrik 2008). Microeconomists in development studies often blur the line between practitioner and researcher, running organizations such as the Poverty Action Lab, partnering with local development organizations to carry out development interventions, and spending significant time in the field to understand the contextual specificities of their sites. Banerjee & Duflo (2011), the standard bearers of the empiricist movement, argue that, instead of wrestling with the big questions of macroeconomics, scholars should focus on a set of concrete problems that can be solved one at a time. For example, development microeconomists might investigate how to fight diarrhea or dengue, how best to get students into schools, or how to ensure farmers get the fertilizer they need. By understanding the specific barriers that lead to specific problems, they argue, scholars can intelligently and economically tackle development one intervention at a time.

Random control trials (RCTs) have become the gold standard in development microeconomics. In general, an RCT requires researchers to choose an intervention, an intervention site, and a control site that is similar to the selected intervention site but receives no intervention, and then to compare the two sites both before and after the intervention. For example, scholars may seek to measure the health effects of supplying mosquito nets free of charge or the educational effects of improving teacher accountability in one school. Once an intervention is deemed effective through testing, it is then scaled up to other communities. One striking theoretical outcome of the largely atheoretical RCT approach is that its results have called into question much economic research modeled on a rational actor. For example, farmers who say they have no money to buy fertilizer might nevertheless buy fertilizer if it is brought to their homes (Duflo et al. 2009). Similarly, the picture on a pamphlet impacts whether people decide to take out a short-term loan (Bertrand et al. 2005).

Development microeconomists and their RCTs are not without critics. Scholars have raised concerns about the lack of external validity, as well as the problems associated with providing a one-size-fits-all solution in vastly different contexts (Deaton 2010, Shaffer 2011). Certainly, there is no reason to expect that a site chosen at random is somehow more generalizable than a site chosen for specific purposes. Mookherjee (2005) critiques that RCTs test empirical, not theoretical, hypotheses, resulting in a development economics that produces little more than policy manuals. Perhaps the most central concern about RCTs from the practitioner perspective is that the politics of evaluation come into play when selecting development programs. Small, local interventions are far easier to evaluate than large infrastructure projects, despite the fact that local needs might call for the latter. The question becomes “what can we test” as opposed to “what can we change,” and interventions are chosen or designed to fit certain preferred evaluation methods rather than address wider social problems (Picciotto 2012, Ravallion 2009). In the end,

the experiments of development microeconomists may improve one specific aspect of the lived reality for a particular population, but like their institutionalist counterparts reviewed above, their focus on a relatively narrow set of variables tends to miss the causal complexity generated by the contextual diversity of history, politics, and culture.

Although new institutionalism and microeconomics have gained the majority of recent media attention in development studies, they are but two of several new approaches to development in economics and political science. For example, building from Bates (1981), political scientists are demonstrating how extractive states often develop out of societal divisions. Racial groups often act as unique interest groups, with a distinct advantage in influencing policy and determining the allocation of public goods along racial lines (Alesina et al. 1999, Habyarimana et al. 2007). This complicates opportunities for collective action, increases rationale for ethnic conflict, and promotes the development of predatory institutions. However, there are exceptions. Singh (2011) argues that ethnic polarization occurs only when groups lack common engagement in a social contract. Kerala, India, her case study, is extremely diverse, yet due to local buy-ins, no one interest group asserts its interests over the majority.

New growth theory has also recently gained renewed attention among development scholars. Economists have long agreed that economic growth can be achieved by the addition of more capital, more labor, and more technology, but this type of growth always has diminishing returns. New growth theorists argue that smarter growth requires investments in the ideas, innovations, and abilities of the workers—their human capital—to most efficiently increase formal economic output. Moreover, these investments in individuals' abilities allow them to complement formal wages with other innovative forms of subsistence production (Evans 2010, Helpman 2004, Ruttan 1998). Because institutions are the main determinants of innovation and accumulation of human capital, new growth theorists conclude that understanding growth also requires understanding the evolution of institutions (Helpman 2004) and that promoting economic growth requires the engagement of institutional actors.

In short, development scholarship in political science and economics is reaching a new consensus that institutions (and their historical constructions) matter, especially as they relate to social divisions and the development of human capital. Nevertheless, this scholarship still too often continues to seek a one-size-fits-all cause (in the case of the new institutionalists) or a one-size-fits-all solution (in the case of the microeconomists), even as studies demonstrate that there are always prominent exceptions to the rule (e.g., the paradox of Chinese development, Whyte 2009).

As others have noted (e.g., Evans 2010), modern development theory appears to be converging once again. This time, however, the new consensus is built not on a grand theory, but on the consistent relevance of a few key factors: institutions, social divisions, and human capital. Of course, as noted above, the first two of these three factors were already prominent in development sociology throughout the 1990s. If this interdisciplinary consensus is to move forward, scholars must next dig deeper into these three factors. Institutions matter, but which institutions? How are institutional variations shaped by particular political, cultural, and economic arrangements? Can interventions chart new development paths despite long-standing institutional deficits? If interventions are attempted, who are the intervening actors, how do they conceive of the desired intervention, and how are intervention recipients chosen? Similarly, social divisions and human capital matter, but what do we know about the multitude of social divisions and inequalities that are structured by societies? Who are the winners and the losers when it comes to political and economic power, and how do these hierarchies shape development possibilities? In the next section, we argue that sociology's unique disciplinary approach makes it especially well-suited for answering these cutting-edge development questions.



## SOCIOLOGY'S PRIVILEGED POSITION IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DEVELOPMENT SCHOLARSHIP

A new interdisciplinary consensus places sociologists in a privileged position from which to contribute to development theory. Development sociologists have long prioritized questions of institutions, social inequalities, and human capital in their analyses. But development sociologists could do more to pull insights from other areas of the discipline into their research agenda. Below we review five such sociological areas from which development scholars could draw insights: institutions, social mobilizations, culture, inequality, and evaluation. These five areas speak especially well to the points of interdisciplinary consensus highlighted above.

### Institutions

Institutional analyses have long been central to the sociology of development. From the beginning, sociologists have eschewed any institutional approach that suggests one particular kind of institution, or one particular institutional practice, can explain most development outcomes. Instead, sociologists have prioritized analyses of the complex, context-specific paths by which institutional developments occur. Mahoney (2010), for example, finds that postcolonial institutional outcomes vary in large part according to how local institutions (e.g., those established by indigenous populations such as the Incas) interacted with a particular colonizer's institutions (e.g., Spain or Portugal). Chibber (2003) demonstrates how even a relatively prosperous state such as India, whose institutions are populated by politicians and technocrats specifically committed to the promotion of industrial development, can fail to industrialize when challenged by powerful class interests. More recently, development sociologists have investigated how the historical evolution of state institutions can shape more specific development outcomes, often in counterintuitive ways. For example, Lee & Schrank (2010) find that state innovation policies in Asia intersected with the importation of a particular cultural model of science to generate growing rates of scientific misconduct, and Lange (2012) finds that increasing a state's capacity to distribute public education may counterintuitively increase ethnic violence.

Development sociologists' prioritization of contextual specificity should not prohibit them from searching for processes that might regularly operate across multiple institutional settings (e.g., McAdam et al. 2001). Indeed, most research on developmental states agrees upon the importance of successfully negotiating the tension between states' embeddedness and autonomy. Developmental states are most successful when they gain the necessary support of powerful private actors while remaining sufficiently autonomous from any one social group so as to avoid co-optation or corruption (Chibber 2003, Evans 1995, Lange & Rueschemeyer 2005). How these tensions are negotiated depends on the historical development of state institutions and on the political and cultural environment in which they are operating, but mapping how this tension may be consistently negotiated across different situations provides opportunities for theorizing across cases.

New sociological work has proposed ways for states to effectively deal with this tension. Cohn (2012) argues that states can creatively bypass the tension altogether by implementing development strategies that are relatively cheap, are remarkably uncontroversial, and require almost no institutional transformation or basic administrative capacity, yet are successful in reducing social inequality and relieving poverty. His example is Brazil's investment in low-cost vocational training for trades that require little initial capital investment or educational expertise, such as hairdressing. Cohn finds that new hairdressers build their businesses largely by relying on their social networks; friends and relatives loan new barbers space for their nascent



businesses and offer themselves as the initial client base. As these small entrepreneurs grow their business, they often train and employ others in their communities, thus magnifying the opportunities created by the initial investment. Consistent with new growth theory, Cohn finds that small investments in people may be a much more effective, and less conflict-prone, means of job creation than alternative propositions, such as tax cuts or big investments in a particular industrial base.

More commonly, scholars propose that states can best negotiate the tension between embeddedness and autonomy by strengthening a nation's opportunities for widespread deliberative democracy (Evans 2004). As Chibber (2003) shows, even the best-laid development plans of state actors will fail if they cannot overcome the resistance of powerful economic elites. Giving more decision-making power to broader swaths of the population is theorized to promote development by providing countervailing political pressure against elite interests, thus guarding against corruption and co-optation. Deliberative democracy is also thought to provide the best development solutions because, as Sen (1985) initially contended, grassroots actors are likely to elucidate the most pressing development needs, and their participation encourages broad-based buy-ins to attempted development solutions.

But sociological research on developmental states has yet to fully explore the complex ways in which institutions shape development. Scholarship in the line of Acemoglu et al. proposes that some institutions are more effective than others, with effective institutions typically having stable, well-enforced rules. Scholarship in the line of Evans and Chibber conceptualizes institutions as being responsive to power, such that their development effectiveness increases when political power is dispersed. But the interdisciplinary consensus that institutions matter for development has yet to be accompanied by a parallel consensus for theorizing which institutions matter; how institutions are defined; how institutions interact with each other; and whether successful transformations require changes in institutional function, form, both, or something else entirely. In short, development sociologists need to go inside developing nations' institutions to map their knowledge structures and internal workings. Sociological analyses outside of development scholarship provide models for how this is done.

Beginning with Meyer and his coauthors (Meyer & Rowan 1977, Meyer & Scott 1983), neo-institutionalists in sociology have demonstrated how institutions are shaped by the social, political, and cultural environments in which they are embedded. This embeddedness ensures that institutions can operate within their environment, interacting meaningfully with other institutions and with individuals, even if the resulting institutional form is neither the most efficient or useful for achieving its goals, nor the most consonant with its technical demands or resource flows. Over the years, scholars broadened these initial understandings into theories of institutional change, documenting how historical roles, competition with other institutions, new technologies, or changing social contexts can result in either institutional isomorphism or, occasionally, creative transformation (Campbell 2004, DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Portes & Smith 2012). For example, scholars have demonstrated the importance of local and transnational networks for institutional innovations and entrepreneurship in rapidly developing nations such as China and India (Nee & Opper 2012, Saxenian 2007).

In the hands of development practitioners, the realization that institutions matter has to date too often resulted in the export of organizational blueprints from the Global North to the Global South, without sufficient rationale for why what works in one location might also work in another (Evans 2004, Portes 2006). Given that institutions are by definition slow to change, especially when change requires successful political negotiations and cultural transformations, understanding the relationship between institutions and development requires a more nuanced sociological approach to how institutions shape, and occasionally transform, their environments.



## Social Mobilizations

Institutional scholars in development sociology largely agree that political power, more than the projects of hired technocrats, shapes institutional development capacities (Chibber 2003, Evans 2004, Heller & Evans 2010). Unlike technocrats, politically powerful groups can hold states accountable and successfully push for the implementation of preferred policies. Spreading political power across wider swaths of the population, through participatory democracy projects or social mobilizations, is therefore anticipated to be one of the most effective ways to set development priorities that will work in given local contexts.

A number of new studies provide evidence for these claims. Huber & Stephens (2012) find that deepening democratic participation in Latin America has resulted in the election of more left-leaning political parties, which in turn have implemented more equitable state distribution programs. Lee (2007) highlights how labor-based organizations improve good governance cross-nationally. Baiocchi et al. (2011) investigate how participatory budgeting projects in Brazil, when successfully implemented, have improved development outcomes and generated unprecedented community participation among area citizens. Agarwala (2013) finds that women's informal worker movements in India have won new rights to state-provided social welfare by leveraging local and transnational partnerships. Yet these scholars also warn that deepening political participation is not always a panacea for creating more horizontal distributions of power. In the process of mediating between multiple and diverse local-level demands, social mobilizations often create stratification systems of their own, reinforcing rather than ameliorating power inequalities at the local level (Baiocchi et al. 2011, Wolford 2010).

Despite the increasing agreement that mobilization matters for development outcomes, development scholars have yet to systematically investigate how such mobilizations occur. Why do some mobilizations seem to arise organically from individuals' interests, and others seem to be carefully coordinated by an outside organization? Do the origins, tactics, and formalization of mobilizations shape their effectiveness for development?

Sociologists' rich tradition of social movement research can help development scholars and practitioners alike understand why people mobilize and how their mobilizations may have both intended and unintended consequences. It also would serve as an important corrective to the current development literature, which tends to see much development work as coming from the top down and often ignores the development work enacted by individuals. Local communities are always dynamically engaged with determining their own development directions, even within the constraints of being resource poor, even in the absence of formal deliberative democracy opportunities, and even given their required subservience to the logic of the development sector (Bob 2005).

Finally, incorporating insights from social movement research can help development scholars understand when participatory actions might retrench rather than extend the political, social, or economic rights of citizens. Because social movements often mobilize around narratives of "who we are" (Polletta 2006, Viterna 2013), their actions may reinforce traditional hierarchies of rights, such as the recent mobilization of Latin American religious groups to successfully remove women's reproductive choices (Viterna 2012). Reinforcements of existing inequalities are sometimes blatant, such as when indigenous group mobilizations claim cultural rights to maintain women's subordinate social position. More often, the reinforcement of existing inequalities is subtle; for example, a deliberative democracy program that prioritizes "women's interests" may ironically serve to reinforce traditional cultural notions of women as caretakers of homes and families. Mobilized groups also compete with each other for cultural influence, material resources, and political power. These competitions could strengthen the existing social divisions



found detrimental to development processes by political scientists. In short, social movement scholarship can enhance our understanding of all three consensus factors highlighted above: Social movement analyses can improve knowledge of whether or how institutions are held accountable, which existing social divisions may be exacerbated through identity-based social mobilizations, and whose interests are met under particular development initiatives.

## Culture

If there is indeed an emerging consensus that three factors are especially central to development— institutions, social divisions, and human capital—then there must also be a consensus on the centrality of culture. As noted above, institutions are themselves cultural constructs. Patterson (2013) defines institutions as durable knowledge structures, or shared schemata, that define the rules and expectations of recurrent behavior. Institutions vary, from ritualized interactions at the individual level to the large formal organizations within state governments that scholars often study. In general, institutions allow individuals to function together within a society by making our actions intelligible to one another. Understanding the institutional effects on development, and the possibilities for institutional transformation, therefore requires understanding the meanings, norms, and values that constitute all institutional forms.

Development sociologists have already demonstrated how greater attention to the cultural aspects of institutions improves our understanding of social change. For example, Swidler (2013) documented the cultural sources of institutional resilience maintaining chieftaincies in Malawi. Bandelj & Wherry (2011) demonstrate that notions of local identity can determine whether and how new markets evolve. And Patterson (2013) demonstrates through a comparison of Barbados and Jamaica how the effectiveness of state institutions is determined not only by declarative knowledge structures (i.e., the shared knowledge or facts embedded in the institutional form), but also by procedural knowledge structures (i.e., shared understanding of how to use said knowledge and facts). To advance institutional analyses of development, scholars must understand institutions as cultural entities.

Culture also helps us understand behavior as a reflection of an individual's own identity and the identities one is assigned by others. We draw upon stores of shared knowledge about appropriate behavior for "people like me" (e.g., a woman, a farmer, or a Hutu) in any given situation, thus minimizing the conscious thought required to navigate daily interactions. On the one hand, the meanings assigned to these identities determine how social groups are constructed (e.g., by race, ethnicity, class), as well as the strength of the boundaries constructed between those two groups [Lamont 1999 (1992)]. On the other hand, the meanings assigned to individual identity shape both the actions an individual conceives as possible for oneself and the actions others conceive as possible for that individual. Increasing educational opportunities may not have an effect on development outcomes if education is not considered central to an individual's identity. Cultural analyses of development have also demonstrated that aspects of individuals' cultural lives, including social networks and local power hierarchies, affect their health outcomes (Hall & Lamont 2009).

Cultural analyses in development studies would allow scholars to investigate how shared meanings evolve and are consequential for patterning all sorts of social relations—in institutions, in communities, and in transnational space. Including cultural analyses would therefore improve the questions we ask as well as the answers we can uncover. Cultural analyses also help us evaluate the intended and unintended outcomes of development interventions, such as how meanings surrounding condom usage affect efforts to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS (Tavory & Swidler 2009), how educational aspirations are built on young women's identity transformations (Frye 2012), and



whether world culture might sometimes diffuse beyond the elite networks of IGOs and INGOs to also thrive in local villages (T. Hannan, unpublished manuscript).

### Inequality

A long-standing debate in economics and economic sociology is whether there is a trade-off between equality, growth, and development. Do policies that improve equitable distribution of economic resources by default slow economic growth (see Kenworthy 2007 for review)? Recently, even the World Bank (2006) has stated that inequality is detrimental to development, particularly through its negative effects on good governance. Likewise, institutional studies have increasingly highlighted the positive effects of policies and practices that guarantee widespread rights and opportunities, and political scientists are examining how social group divisions can sabotage development gains.

Sociologists' long history of examining multiple forms of inequality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, rural-urban), their intersections, and the broad sets of institutional factors that shape inequality patterns should be central to broadening this historically narrow debate about inequality and growth. For example, recent work on political inequality, such as analyses connecting felon disenfranchisement, deportation, and labor market participation (King et al. 2012, Western 2006) or studies investigating the human consequences of statelessness (Somers 2008), highlights how unequal distributions of political power and cultural status, in addition to unequal distributions of economic opportunities, affect development outcomes.

Development sociologists drawing from the extensive sociological literature on inequality could shed light on any number of increasingly urgent development questions. For example, when violent crime increases in a nation, it is often theorized to generate economic losses (e.g., lost investment, lost tourism) as well as tragic setbacks in health and education. In El Salvador, for example, parents in some neighborhoods report not sending their children to school because gang violence makes school attendance dangerous. Efforts to combat crime through more effective institutions seldom seem to stem the tide. However, if sociologists were to increasingly investigate how institutions formalize, and sometimes exacerbate, existing social hierarchies, they might better understand the relationship between institutions and the problems they are expected to resolve. For example, when the police and the courts systematically ignore certain forms of crime—like gender- or sexuality-based crimes—to focus on “bigger” questions of gang activities, might they be unintentionally creating communities in which gang violence is especially likely to thrive? Understanding how institutions at the local, national, and transnational levels shape multiple forms of inequality, and understanding the intersecting effects of those inequalities, is necessary to determine whether and how institutions can improve development.

### Evaluation

Programmatic evaluation has never been a focus of sociologists, but it is increasingly the gold standard among development practitioners. Indeed, policy makers now increasingly call for development interventions and policy decisions to be based on evidence (see, e.g., White House 2013) and to be submitted to “monitoring and evaluation” during and after their implementation (World Bank 2004). As a result, practitioners frequently partner with scholars, especially in microeconomics, policy, or business programs, to determine the best methods of evaluation. The intent is to ensure that interventions achieve their desired goal, in part to guarantee to funders that their investments are making a difference. Proponents argue that careful evaluations, ideally based on RCTs comparing a treatment community with a control community, are the best ways to

ensure that real change is achieved. We appreciate that RCT projects are highly transparent about why one community, but not another, was chosen for a development intervention—a welcome change from the opaqueness that has historically surrounded decisions of where to locate development projects. Yet, as noted above, scholars have raised concerns that the politics of evaluation may come into play when selecting development programs, such that “what can we test” rather than “what can we change” determines interventions (Picciotto 2012, Ravallion 2009).

Sociological insights into evaluation raise additional questions (Lamont 2012). Sociologists have long understood that measurement is a fundamentally social process (Duncan 1984). Societies choose to measure what they already value, and the kind of measures they develop determines how much value is given to an object or a process in relation to others. Evaluation always requires categorization, a process that can create or reinforce boundaries between groups, ideas, or practices. Evaluations also imply valuations and thus can create, change, or reinforce hierarchies. Studies show that how objects are valued varies by cultural context (Fourcade 2011) and institutional practices and pressures (Kalev et al. 2006). As scholars who regularly have our own work evaluated by others, we appreciate that evaluation is influenced by the taste and the disciplinary worldview of the reviewers (Lamont 2009).

Similar processes of evaluation must occur in development studies: Scholars and practitioners must value some kinds of development outcomes more than others, and the measurements they choose largely determine which policies and interventions are deemed successful and which populations or problems are deemed especially worthy of interventions. All these decisions are predicated on the worldview of the assessor, and they are consequential for the implementation and analysis of development policies and practices within states, IGOs, and NGOs.

Evaluations of development programs typically study intended consequences but have little incentive to look at unintended consequences. Funding and political pressures create incentives for implementing successful projects. Nevertheless, success for a majority might imply negative consequences for a minority. Whether such complex outcomes are captured and understood will fundamentally affect our understanding of development theory and development practice, but this depends largely on the evaluation design. Evaluations are also consequential for development in how they choose to measure and value outcomes in the first place. What are the consequences of measuring an intervention against a nonintervention rather than against some sort of external criteria? Whose evaluations are given priority? And what new policies or programs do evaluations inspire?

Increasing attention to how development is evaluated would improve scholarly understandings of how institutions and targeted development interventions affect social outcomes. Sociological work in this area would help development scholars make visible and explicit the preferred criteria of evaluation, the consequences of the evaluation process itself, and how evaluation is shaped by what data are available in the first place.

### A Sociological Perspective on Development

As documented above, a new consensus among development scholars in several disciplines is emerging: Development is best explained by analyzing how a few key factors evolve across variable national and subnational contexts. Three of these key factors are institutions, social divisions, and questions of human growth. In this section, we argued that sociology’s historical focus on whether, how, and why social patterns vary across communities puts us in a privileged position from which to theorize and analyze these key development factors. We have further suggested that development sociologists could do more to bring insights from other areas of sociology to bear on development scholarship. This is not a call to simply apply theories developed in Western



nations to similar questions in developing countries. Rather, this is a call for development scholars to engage deeply with the work of, for example, neo-institutional sociologists, social movement sociologists, or cultural sociologists, inter alia, to expand the kinds of questions we ask and the theories we can develop about how social transformation occurs. Regrettably, space constraints prevent us from reviewing other important development factors arising in the interdisciplinary literature (e.g., the importance of the environment, or migration, for development processes) and other potential areas for sociological innovation in development studies (e.g., network analyses; transnational perspectives). However, we hope the above review demonstrates sufficiently how the new emerging consensus in development theory provides an important opening for the integration of an increasingly sociological approach to development scholarship.

### THE MISSING “DEVELOPMENT” IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

For decades, development scholars have debated the best targets for development interventions. Should development practitioners aim to reform states, open markets, strengthen civil society, build infrastructure, reduce inequality, or some combination thereof? We conclude our review by arguing that these approaches have insufficiently investigated another important player that may require reform: the development sector itself.

The development sector is a huge, growing, transnational field composed of a highly diverse set of actors. Development practitioners work in local, state, and national governments; in massive IGOs or INGOs; in small, community-based development organizations; and even in transnational do-it-yourself development initiatives. Despite this diversity of actors and resources, the field appears united by several shared sets of best-practice narratives and relatively consistent tactical repertoires. At minimum, this field is composed of tens of thousands of organizations, often linked transnationally, and it spends more than US\$250 billion annually with the specific goal of influencing development outcomes.<sup>1</sup> At the local level, development actors are often a major source of employment, as well as an important provider of education, food, resources, and political capital, in impoverished communities around the world.

Yet the implications of the development field for local communities have yet to be systematically evaluated. At a more macro level, numerous scholars have argued that development aid overwhelmingly fails to reduce poverty or address the underlying power inequalities it targets (Easterly 2006, Ferguson 1990, Jackson 2005, Li 2007). At the meso level, scholars of humanitarianism have documented how organizational priorities, more than people’s on-the-ground needs, shape the actions of NGOs (Bob 2005, Krause 2014). But even conceding that official development aid has done little to promote national economic growth, we suggest that the development field’s extensive, transnational expansion into impoverished communities is nevertheless highly consequential for the lived experiences of the individuals who reside in those communities. Understanding how the presence of development actors in local communities may transform

<sup>1</sup>In 2007, Kharas (2007a) estimated that there are 233 multilateral development agencies, several hundred international NGOs, and tens of thousands of national NGOs (not including community-based organizations); whereas aid grows incrementally, the number of NGOs grows exponentially. Authors’ estimate of financing is based on the following calculations. In 2012, official development aid from DAC (Development Assistance Committee) countries within the OECD reached US\$125.6 billion (OECD 2013). In 2013, official development aid is estimated at US\$16.3 billion for non-DAC countries (OECD 2015). In 2011, US foundations gave an estimated US\$46.9 billion (Lawrence 2012). And in 2007, the Brookings Institute estimated that private giving by INGOs totaled between US\$58 and US\$68 billion annually (Kharas 2007b). In all this amounts to US\$256.8 billion. This estimate is likely very conservative; in addition to relying on old data in sectors where giving has been increasing over the past decade, the estimate excludes any foundation giving outside the United States and any estimate of bilateral or domestic NGO giving.

identities, survival strategies, mobilization processes, and social networks should therefore be a central component of development studies.

To begin, we argue that development as a field is not well captured in current analyses. Scholars often refer to NGO actors within the development field as civil society, a term that typically connotes associations or organizations that, by definition, reflect community interests and advocate for those interests to the state (Viterna et al. 2015). Yet the term civil society poorly captures the complexity of NGO actions. In many impoverished communities around the world, NGOs may act more like states than like civil society. They may be more likely than the state to provide clean water, design school curriculums, organize local government structures, or distribute health services. As central powerholders in impoverished communities, NGOs are just as likely to become the target of civil society demands as to be the vehicle carrying those demands to the state. Indeed, one important new trend in the development field (an emerging best practice) is an increasing expectation that development projects be carried out through partnerships with government institutions, further blurring the line between development organizations and government institutions (Brütigam & Segarra 2007).

Yet to suggest that development actors are state-like actors is also problematic. Although some development organizations reside inside state institutions, most have no constitutional obligation to provide services to a particular community, no formal political position from which to exercise power, and no requirement to stay engaged with the community it is serving any longer than its organizational needs deem necessary or its funding priorities allow (Watkins et al. 2012).

Development actors are therefore local powerholders that can define for themselves whether and how to be accountable to the people they serve. At present, scholars have theoretical tools to help them understand how communities mobilize to leverage demands against states, and we have theoretical tools to help us understand when and how states might respond to those demands. However, we have yet to theorize whether and how communities mobilize to target development actors (including NGOs) with their requests. Nor do we understand the factors that might determine which communities are most successful in winning projects or opportunities from development actors (but see Bob 2005), or whether competitions over these scarce NGO resources may result in new or different social divisions. Development actors therefore are not well captured either by studies of states or by studies of civil society; the field requires analyses as an entity of its own.

Scholars have of course already demonstrated how development actors are consequential for a wide variety of complex development outcomes. For example, studies find that intergovernmental finance institutions helped reshape national economic practices and institutional structures in developing nations (e.g., Babb 2001, Chorev & Babb 2009). World polity scholars demonstrate that the increasingly dense, transnational network ties between states and INGOs are associated with significant changes in development outcomes at the national level, such as educational attainment, environmental outcomes, and scientific developments (Schofer 2003, Schofer & Hironaka 2005, Schofer & Meyer 2005). Development actors influence how well a nation is able to stem the transmission of HIV/AIDS (Robinson 2011) or the spread of local-level conflict and violence (Barron et al. 2011). Development actors have also transformed individuals by increasing their social capital (Sanyal 2009) and changing their entrepreneurial ideals (Swidler & Watkins 2009). Organizations such as the Poverty Action Lab (<http://www.povertyactionlab.org/policy-lessons>) provide scores of evidence demonstrating how particular development interventions have increased student learning, improved agricultural outputs, and reduced child mortality, among others.

Yet development scholars are only beginning to unpack the complexities of how local contexts shape the outcomes of development interventions. Because development interventions often clash with local cultural meanings, it is difficult to predict whether individuals will use condoms (Tavory



& Swidler 2009), engage in transactional sex (Swidler & Watkins 2007), or gain the knowledge desired by development actors from attending trainings (Watkins & Swidler 2012). In Tanzania, Dill (2013) finds that development projects aimed at increasing local people's power (through the best practice of community-driven development) had the unexpected outcome of increasing the states' power and authority over local communities. Watkins & Swidler (2012) conclude that whether international efforts support or impede existing local efforts at HIV prevention has more to do with how the conflicting interests and worldview of the various actors (e.g., donors, brokers, villagers) get resolved, than with what works for HIV/AIDS prevention more generally.

Despite critics' regular claims that development as a field has failed to significantly improve the quality of life of the world's poorest communities, the reality is that development actors do transform the institutions, social divisions, and human capital of individuals in developing nations in influential—if not necessarily good or bad—directions. Indeed, although some development actors send development prescriptions from the Global North to the Global South, the negotiations between politicians, technocrats, and other development actors determine whether developing governments will accept, reject, or modify the proposed development prescriptions (Robinson 2012). As states are increasingly willing to partner with development actors to deliver health care (Kamat 2003), operate educational programs (Clough 2013), and develop systems of participatory budgeting (Gibson 2012), it is logical to conclude that development field actors' influence in shaping the policies and practices of developing governments will only continue to grow.

We encourage the expansion of this scholarship in two directions. First, analyses of the intended and unintended consequences of local development interventions must extend beyond culture to also examine the effects of the development field on other social patterns, including local-level inequality, social mobilization practices, and questions of state legitimacy and capacity, among others. To illustrate, we know very little about how local development interventions may reshape local patterns of inequality. Development organizations commonly report that they “built 80 schools” or “established 50 village councils,” but they seldom discuss how they chose where to build schools or establish village councils. Meanwhile, scholars and practitioners alike typically study the consequences of those schools or village councils at the point of their delivery, but fail to examine the potential consequences to those who failed to win the development project. If one village's children are recipients of a new educational program, how does that affect the employment, migration, or life chances of children in a neighboring village who suddenly find that their relative education has declined in the local region's labor market? Likewise, although a few scholars have provided excellent examples of how communities organize to attract nonstate development assistance (Bob 2005, Stewart 2012), we know little about how the process of securing those resources might create competition instead of cooperation between or within communities, or how such competition might in turn affect a community's mobilization potential. Furthermore, if communities increasingly turn to NGOs for clean water or educational opportunities, how might that affect their views of state legitimacy? In short, rather than simply evaluate whether development actors accomplish what they promise, scholars must also evaluate how the very presence of development actors may affect any number of social processes critical for development, often in unintended or unforeseen ways.

Second, we believe that development scholarship would benefit from data collection efforts aimed at mapping the development field more generally to better understand its consistencies and contradictions. How are the actors distributed across space, both geographical (e.g., Africa or Latin America) and institutional (e.g., states, INGOs, or local NGOs)? How do development actors make decisions about which projects to implement (e.g., health or gender) and where to implement them (e.g., Village A or Village B)? How much overlap in tactics, goals, and outcomes exists between counterhegemonic organizations and more mainstream development organizations that also



prioritize the political mobilization of local citizenry? How do the logics or best practices of the field emerge, and how consistent, or competitive, are these narratives across organizations, from the highly transnational to the exclusively local? What organizational factors (e.g., religious versus secular missions) might account for variations in projects and resources? Where does funding initiate, and through which organizations does it travel before reaching the intended recipients? What coalitions are formed, both horizontally and vertically, and how might these affect transnational development agendas? Most centrally, how do these variations in the field affect the lived experiences of the individuals on the ground, who often look to development actors for social provision?

Although our knowledge of humanitarian organizations is growing, development scholarship has yet to seriously analyze the effects of this massive field of actors on the lived experiences of individuals in developing nations. Cultural sociologists have begun the discussion. Future research must examine why some communities are more successful than others at attracting development assistance. We must also examine how the fluctuating packages of assistance available to a community in turn shape the way that community mobilizes, the way it governs itself, and its internal distribution of wealth and opportunities, as well as how its wealth and opportunities compare with those of its neighbors.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sociologists were central figures in the evolution of development studies, and sociological insights have regularly pushed the development field to view traditional problems from new perspectives. It is unfortunate, then, that sociologists became somewhat marginalized in debates about the best way to do development. In this review, we have argued that the new interdisciplinary consensus in development theory—a consensus that both capabilities and economic growth matter, and that institutions, social divisions, and human growth are central factors for understanding development disparities—puts sociologists in a privileged position to contribute to the conversation. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that sociological research on social change has begun to once again consolidate around the idea of development. The Section on the Sociology of Development is at this writing the fastest-growing section in the American Sociological Association; the University of California is launching a new journal titled *Sociology of Development*; and a new generation of scholars are increasingly identifying themselves as development specialists, while the torchbearers of the earlier decades are returning again to development questions. As sociological insights into institutions, mobilization, culture, inequality, and evaluation are increasingly brought to the analyses of development process and development practice, the result will be a fuller understanding of the complexity of development transformations, as well as a more integrated, coherent explanation of key sociological issues such as poverty, inequality, and power at local, national, and transnational levels.

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