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Volunteer tourism in the context of development thinking

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is sometimes discussed as contributing to development goals in economically impoverished countries. Others argue that it contributes little if anything at all to material development, and others again claim that this is simply not its aim. Putting aside its contribution (or lack thereof), there is little doubt that volunteer tourism influences how development issues are constructed and mediated to the general public, framing the ways in which people's desires to make a difference are realised. It is a 'public face of development' in this sense. This paper looks at volunteer tourism not as a form of development assistance per se, but instead examines how development claims associated with it intersect with important strands of development thinking. It reviews some important themes in development thinking in order to argue that it is changes in how development is conceived of that have made possible the unlikely association between a form of leisure and the erstwhile political and macro-economic aim of development. Further, it suggests that research in this area could usefully focus less on the actions of volunteer tourism providers and their clientele, and more on the underpinning 'development' assumptions reflected and reified through these actions.

Keywords
community, development, happiness, volunteer tourism, wellbeing

Introduction: Volunteer tourism as development

Influential accounts of volunteer tourism focus on its capacity to contribute in some way to development, broadly defined. Wearing's (2001) foundational definition sees it as including, albeit not limited to, volunteering '. . . in an organized way to undertake

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holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society' (p. 1). An educational resource aimed at students of tourism describes it as,

> '. . . a type of tourism where an individual will travel abroad to a destination that is predominantly considered 'undeveloped' or 'developing' to offer their support to those in need. And when we use the phrase 'those in need', which is expressed a lot in volunteering, we refer to those who are surrounded by extreme poverty, do not have adequate education and healthcare facilities and frequently have little building infrastructure'. (Tourism Teacher, undated)

Another account claims it is a prominent part of what has been described as the 'travelers' philanthropy movement' (Honey, 2011). Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate and founder of the Kenyan green development non-governmental organisation the Green Belt Movement, regards travel philanthropy is 'a form of development assistance flowing from the travel industry and travelers into local conservation and community projects and organisations' (cited in Honey, 2011: 1). This is similar to the view of a number of academic accounts of the phenomenon. The claim to be a 'form of development assistance' whilst certainly contested, is nonetheless implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the advocacy of volunteer tourism (Butcher and Smith, 2015; Lee and Zhang, 2020).

Others decry volunteer tourism on the grounds that it is not really development at all, and that it is all too often about the volunteers' self-image and the volunteer tour operators' profits. Both of these themes are developed in analyses that associate volunteer tourism with neoliberalism – the reduction of greater areas of social live (in this case development volunteering) to the logic of the market (Guttentag, 2009; Heath, 2007; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Vrasti, 2015). Others again more prosaically point out that development is simply not part of the remit of volunteer tourism (Palacios, 2010). These themes are not only well rehearsed in academic literature, but also feature in popular coverage of the issue in the media (e.g. Mitchell, 2011; Rosenberg, 2018).

The key to navigating the various views is to address a different, logically prior, question: *what understanding of development is being assumed* in the development claims associated with volunteer tourism? A useful way to think about this is to consider volunteer tourism as a 'public face of development' (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004). Public faces of development are '. . .the ways development is communicated and conveyed by diverse organisations, institutions and individuals, including international development NGOs, government departments, fair trade companies, development education centres, schools, volunteering agencies and media corporations, for diverse purposes' (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004: 657). These public faces of development '. . . play a central role in mediating connections between the southern poor, development organisations and northern individuals' (Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004: 657). Drawing on this concept, it is possible to look at volunteer tourism's role in reflecting and reifying *particular* conceptions of development. It is these particular, socially constructed conceptions that shape how the public act upon the universal humanistic, altruistic impulse to 'make a difference' to others in need. This is perhaps more important than the oft addressed question of whether a particular volunteer tourism initiative is deemed successful, or more likely 'ethical', with regard to its development impact.

In earlier decades the impulse to act in pursuit of a better word in relation to development issues would have been to a greater extent channelled through public politics – campaigns, or support for parties deemed progressive on the issues at hand (Giddens, 1994). Yet more recent prominent public faces of development include charity challenges, Live Aid style music events and ethical consumption initiatives such as Fairtrade (Barnett et al., 2011; Chouliaraki, 2012; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004). Volunteer tourism shares features with these recent lifestyle-oriented examples, but it is also distinctive in that it involves the public getting involved, personally and intimately, in addressing development goals. In contrast to the other examples given, volunteer tourism involves a direct, personal role, in situ, in assisting others, something that arguably appeals in an age of mistrust of grand political narratives and institutions (Butcher and Smith, 2015; Giddens, 1994). So it is significant in shaping, and reflecting, public perceptions of 'development'.

This paper begins by providing a short, selective summary of post-1945 development thought, focused on the relative shift from *development as modernisation* to *post-development*. It then identifies a number of key changes in the emphasis of development thinking related to this shift: (i) from the *sovereign nation state to civil society as agent of development*; (ii) from the *national community* to the *local community* as the potential beneficiaries; (iii) from *economic transformation* to *localised natural limits to development*; and (iv) from *macro-economic indicators of development to more subjective aims*, such as 'wellbeing', 'happiness' and 'conviviality'. These newer development agendas – contested ideas themselves – provide the novel basis for private holidays to be associated with the erstwhile public, political issue of development. The implication of this is that the analysis of volunteer tourism should consider this practice in the context of, and as a product of, wider trends in how development is conceived of. The paper concludes with some comments on how we think about volunteer tourism and the tourists themselves in the light of this.

From development as modernisation to post-development

Development as modernisation

For much of the post-World War 2 period, and often still today, what has been termed the *development as modernisation* outlook has shaped debates on development (Willis, 2023). From the global North, Rostow's 'stages of development' set out a model for the global South (or the 'third world' as it was referred to at the time). This involved stages that countries pass through on their way to becoming developed. Rostow's model was a theory of development, but was also, in part, an ideological weapon in the Cold War (Willis, 2023). The Cold War framed a geopolitics in which both the communist East and capitalist West respectively encouraged former colonies to follow their path towards growth and prosperity (Hettne, 1995; Preston, 1996). Both sides promised better economic prospects – economic transformation to a more developed, modern economy, and high growth rates – to global South nations.

Governments of countries newly liberated from colonialism explicitly sought to catch up with the developed nations. They:

> ‘took it for granted that western industrialised countries were already developed and that the cure for 'underdevelopment' was, accordingly, to become as much as possible like them. This seemed to suggest that the royal road to 'catching up' was through an accelerated process of urbanisation’.
>
> (Friedman and Weaver, 1979: 91)

The prospect of ‘catching up’ was not without foundation. In the period from the start of decolonisation in the 1950s through to the mid 1970s, economic growth was generally strong in former or soon to be former colonies (Artadi and Sala-i-Martin, 2003) and development looked a realistic prospect in the post-colonial South. For example, In Africa, the economically poorest of the continents, per capita growth between 1960 and 1975, at 1.5% to 2% annually, was similar to or better than most other global regions (Artadi and Sala-i-Martin, 2003).

The growth optimism of the 50s and 60s – the ‘post-war boom’ years – receded in the 1970s (Judt, 2010). Recession confounded the ambitious development plans of newly independent global South states. Borrowing to boost development became borrowing to service debt. By the 1980s debt crises led to the imposition of structural adjustment programmes by the post-World War 2 global financial order in the form of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These represented a challenge not only to the ambitious plans for development that many southern states had, but also to their hard won national sovereignty. In many cases pessimism regarding the prospects for national ‘catching up’ replaced optimism (Hettne, 1995; Rist, 2009).

Dependency theorists argued that the stalling of growth in the 1970s was due to the structural inequality built into the global economy and international politics. Prominent amongst them was the French Egyptian thinker Samir Amin (2013), who argued that developing nations have failed to develop not because of internal barriers or policies, but because the more developed West had systematically underdeveloped them and continued to do so. They identified barriers in the present – economic and political, institutional and structural – that maintained the combined yet uneven development of the world axiomatic of the Marxian thought the dependency theorists are associated with (Baran, 1960; Harvey, 2003).

The dependency school were also associated with radical political movements in the global South, and a number of protagonists saw their theorising as part of political praxis in a struggle to challenge structural impediments to sovereign growth. In this respect, Samir Amin was associated with communist politics in various African states (Review of African Political Economy (ROAPE), 2017), whilst other prominent dependency theorists, such as Celso Furtado (Brazil) and Aníbal Pinto (Chile), shaped social democratic alternatives in South America.

Whilst the dependency school were politically at odds with Rostow’s ‘stages’, the protagonists in the debates around development from the political Left and Right, and geo-political North and South, generally shared a common aim: *development as modernisation.* This assumed the transformation of ‘underdevelopment’ (a term commonly used by the dependency school as well as in mainstream economics and development debates) to ‘development’ through economic growth, industrialisation, urbanisation and the application of modern science and technology to that end. This was evident in Truman's view, the Marshall plan, the broadly Keynesian post 1945 consensus, western governments' views and the outlook of post-colonial states themselves. It was substantially, albeit not without criticisms and reservation, also shared by the political opponents of all of the above, the dependency school included.

The framing of *development as modernisation* was evident in the international volunteering of the period, itself a key public face of development of its time. This took place through the Peace Corps and similar state and quasi-state organisations in their respective countries, founded in the 1960s and 1970s (Butcher and Smith, 2015). There is no doubt that altruism, or 'love' for humanity motivated volunteers, then as now. But as Cobbs-Hoffman points out, 'love operated within political limits', and those limits – despite the emotional and personal commitment of volunteers – were effectively US state economic and foreign policy (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998). Modernisation was the clear aim of these organisations (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998). Whilst their role was less about growing productive capacity directly, and more about skills and language training to support that, the narrative underpinning volunteering was that it was part of a national contribution to the modernisation of other sovereign states.

It is worth noting that this incarnation of volunteering did attract some criticism from both the global South and North, on the basis that it involved a colonial assumption akin to the sentiment of Kipling's pro-imperial poem 'The White Man's Burden' (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998). This charge – that volunteering presented recipients as in need of largesse and charity from a benevolent West – could also be powerful given the proximity of colonial wars. It motivated some, including some western volunteers, to adopt political positions contrary to their respective organisations and governments (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998). However, this was far more likely to involve demands for greater development than a rejection of *development as modernisation*.

Post-development

Writing in 1992, Wolfgang Sachs set out what he saw as the obsolescence of *development as modernisation* in a series of essays titled *Development in the Ruins*:

> 'I believe that the idea of development stands today like a ruin in the intellectual landscape, its shadows obscuring our vision. It is high time we tackled the archaeology of this towering conceit, that we uncovered its foundations to see it for what it is: the outdated monument to an immodest era'. (Sachs, 1992)

Out of these ruins emerged critiques of the desirability of development itself, even if it were possible (Sutcliffe, 1999). Prominent amongst critiques of *development as modernisation* was *post-development* (accompanied by associated approaches with various prefixes: alternative, green, community, anti, etc.). Post-Development 'did not intend to improve the attempts to bring about 'development', but questioned this very objective' (Ziai, 2017: 2547). It advocated the 'rejection of the entire paradigm', and instead called for 'alternatives to development' (Ziai, 2017: 2547). It stands against development as a 'Eurocentric and hierarchic construct defining non-Western, non-modern, non-industrialised ways of life as inferior and in need of "development"' (Ziai, 2017: 2547). Hence the growth of broadly post-development politics focused less on economic structures inhibiting development per se, and more on assumptions underpinning how we think about and gauge development.

Post-development thought became an important point of reference in the 1990s, with influential thinkers from the global south prominent within it. Columbian scholar Escobar (1995) argued in *Encountering Development* that the Western model of development justified itself by claiming to be rational and scientific, and therefore neutral and objective. In reality, he claimed, modernisation theory treated people and cultures as abstract concepts and statistics, objects of development rather than subjects. Development was 'done to' rather than 'done by' those subject to it. Even the identification of poverty was principally a vehicle for asserting the moral and cultural superiority of the West in post-colonial times (Escobar, 1995).

There is a more recent iteration of broadly post-development thought pertaining to the global South: 'decoloniality'. Decoloniality, originated with Latin American thinkers such as Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano, takes issue not only with development as a category, but with modernity itself and its roots in Enlightenment thinking (Mignolo and Walsh, 2016). For decolonial theorists, modernity and colonialism are conjoined, and consequently the practice of modern development suppressed other 'knowledge systems' or 'ways of knowing' from the global south (Mignolo and Walsh, 2016). Decolonial theorists seek to 'decolonise' not just institutions, *but knowledge itself*. Hence decoloniality involves strong relativism: a denial that there are universal, human standards against which we can judge development. Decoloniality also has opponents within (Táíwò, 2022) and outside (Stokes, 2023) the global south, who seek to uphold development, and the pursuit of knowledge about it, as a part of a universal human project.

The notion that post-development thought is the product of southern critique of imposed western 'development' is also challenged by Sutcliffe, who argues that post-development thinking can involve projecting western disillusionment with modernity onto economically impoverished societies, resulting in a profound conservatism regarding the opportunities for progressive change:

> 'Because the destination, which in the West we experience every day, seems so unsatisfactory, then all aspects of it are rejected as a whole: along with consumerism out goes science, technology, urbanisation, modern medicine and so on and in sometimes comes a nostalgic, conservative post-developmentalism' (Sutcliffe, 1999: 151–2)

It is a pertinent perspective regarding volunteer tourism, and tourism studies more broadly, where small scale and limited development is often talked up as 'sustainable' in societies lacking the benefits of modern development (Aramberri, 2010).

Facets of new thinking on development

The shift from *development as modernisation* to *post-development*, outlined above, is associated with a number of features relevant to the development claims of volunteer tourism: (i) a shift from the *nation state to civil society as the agent of development*; (ii) from the *national community* to the *local community* as the potential beneficiaries; (iii) from *economic transformation to localised natural limits* to development; and (iv) from *macro-economic indicators of development to more subjective aims*, such as 'wellbeing', 'happiness' and 'conviviality'. These strands of thinking on development make possible and frame the novel association between volunteer tourism and development today.

From sovereign state to civil society

One feature of the shift from *development as modernisation* to *post-development* has been the relative demise of the state as the key agent of development. This has coincided with the rise of non-state actors – non-governmental organisations, ethical business and the ethical consumer – in discussions of development.

In the 1950s and 60s there had been an optimism regarding the capacity of the state to play the leading role supporting modernisation through economic growth (Hettne, 1995). In the aftermath of two world wars and economic recession this role for the state seemed like an imperative, and political parties advocating statist Keynesian development projects were widely successful electorally in the more economically developed countries (Judt, 2010). President Truman's famous 1949 speech had argued that prosperity being experienced in the developed countries would also, in time, accrue to the so called 'third world' – those countries breaking the bonds of colonialism and setting out as sovereign nations. It was, for Truman, a 'duty' for the developed, free countries to assist this process (Hettne, 1995; Potter et al., 1999).

The collapse of the communist alternative pulled the rug from statist schemes for development proposed by the Left (Furedi, 2014; Giddens, 1994; Hettne, 1995; Laidi, 1998). But despite a very brief triumphalism, capitalism, without the crutch of anti-communism as a unifying moral rationale for the 'free world', itself stood somewhat exposed. The role of the state as a body able to 'row' was replaced by a sense that governments could at best 'steer' the boat through rough economic waters (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

This dual crisis – of statist political projects of Left and Right – left a development void partially filled by 'civil society', which in this context refers to the non-governmental sector, and also in some formulations the market (Huddock, 1999). Non-governmental organisations became increasingly influential in development agendas as state led projects lost credibility (Adler, 2018; Huddock, 1999; Makoba, 2002). This was referred to by Adler as the 'NGO International' (Adler, 2018). According to Kothari:

> 'The assumption after the second World War, by both elites and radicals, that the state would be a liberator and equaliser, is no longer avidly held, and there is a creative reconsideration of the relationship between state and civil society. There is a rediscovery of civil society as an autonomous expression of human and social will'.
>
> (1984, cited in Hettne, 1995: 33).

A plethora of terms exists that refer, in different ways, to this trend, such as 'third system politics', 'alternative development' as well as 'civil society' (Friedman, 1992; Hettne, 1995; Preston, 1996; Rist, 2009). In particular, radical thought has turned from state led projects aimed at *development as modernisation*, towards post-development influenced strategies operating through non-governmental organisations and stressing community based aims (Potter et al., 1999: 9).

One event notable in the rise of this new politics of development was the establishment of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, an event attended by a variety of activists from across the world, under the slogan *Another World is Possible* (Adler, 2018). The World Social Forum in its inception embodied a radical neo-populism, emphasising ‘community’ and ‘people’, and criticising globalisation and state led politics as ‘top down’ and oppressive. Whilst emphasising greater equality and ‘social justice’, it also stressed environmental limits to the type of growth and development that had been key to emancipatory projects of the past.

In the context of this new thinking the building of a school may be viewed less as a capital project of a sovereign nation reflecting the democratically expressed views of national citizens – one that should probably be part of a national, co-ordinated expansion of educational opportunities – and more as the efforts of ‘ethical’ organisations and individuals. The rise of non-governmental organisations, promoting localised, community projects based around ‘alternative development’ opens the possibility for volunteer tourism to be part of the development mix. It is common for volunteer tourism to be run in conjunction with, or in some cases by, non-governmental organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, CARE International and World Vision, organisations with ‘development’ as a part of their remit (Freidus, 2017).

The other aspect of the demise of the state in development and the growth of civil society as a prospective alternative is the growth of the market in development, in the form of ethical appeals to consumers. The growth of ethical consumption as a vehicle for the erstwhile state led political goal of development has become a significant feature of public faces of development since the 1980s (Barnett et al., 2011). It is manifest in Fairtrade, today a feature of every supermarket and university campus (Anderson, 2015), in the latter case often alongside posters for volunteer tourism opportunities. One survey found that Fairtrade initiatives had become the principal way that members of the public felt they could assist people on the developing world (Darnton and Kirk, 2011). Volunteer tourism is a striking example too. Whilst involving far fewer people, it nonetheless takes the principle of ethical consumption and brings the consumer face to face with the object of their concern (Butcher and Smith, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Vrasti, 2015).

Ethical consumption and the growth of the ‘NGO International’ are related. Often commercial volunteer tourism companies’ appeals to the ethical concerns of their prospective customers are on the basis that they can get involved with non-governmental organisation led projects with a development element. According to anthropologist Andrea Freidus, whilst initially eschewing the ‘tourism’ tag as unserious, some non-governmental organisations have adapted to the newer development narrative and are often happy to work with what are effectively commercial tour operators selling ‘ethical’ holidays (2017). This marks a significant and novel framing of development, reflected and reified through volunteer tourism.

From nation to local community

The spatial corollary of the shift away from the nation state as agent of development is an emphasis on the 'local' as a more appropriate, more human site for development. An advocacy of localism has characterised the field of 'tourism studies' for some time, with Murphy's (1985) *Tourism: A Community Approach* an early example. Almost 25 years ago Mowforth and Munt (1998) argued that 'the debate is currently not one of whether local communities should be involved in the development of tourism to their areas, but how they should be involved, and whether 'involvement' means 'control' (pp. 103-4).

Writers on tourism from a broadly post-development perspective advocate for a radical localism. One popular text on tourism – *Tourism for Development: Empowering Communities* (Scheyvens, 2002) – focuses exclusively on local development as the spatial level for worthwhile development benefitting communities, with national government presented as generally antithetical to this. Recently, some have declared a 'local turn' in tourism studies (see Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2022), although in truth the rhetorical deference to 'local community' has been a central feature of much writing on tourism development for three decades (Butcher, 2007).

The inhabitants of the *local* are invariably the *community*. A neo-populist emphasis on community is central to post-development schemas. Put simply, this involves the advocacy of 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' approaches to development. Big business and the nation state are deemed grand and impersonal agents of change, unable to address diverse desires and needs rooted in local cultures.

According to Hettne, this neopopulist strand of development thinking is often combined with a stress on primary production and a distaste for industrial civilisation, as well as environmental consciousness and commitment to a just world order (1995). In this vein, post-development pioneer Robert Chambers espoused a philosophy of rural community based development assistance, premised upon the forging of personal connections, empathy and a 'human' dimension in development, in his two volumes *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (Chambers, 1997), and *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Chambers, 1983). The personalised involvement characteristic of volunteer tourism appeals to the neopopulist desire to achieve this 'human' dimension.

Hettne notes that alternative development strategies seek to build *gemeinschaft* – communities that are locally defined and not determined by distant, uniform global forces; communities that are in a sense authentic (1995; see also Hobsbawm, 2007 on the concept of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft). Here, he insightfully links the development debate to a wider sense within society at large that grand and impersonal schemas neglect local and particular, and valued, aspects of culture. This is a theme running through much literature on tourism going back to MacCannell's (1976) *The Tourist: a New Theory of the Leisure Class*, manifest today in the 'critical tourism studies' school (Ateljevic et al., 2011) and advocates of 'degrowth' in tourism (Andriotis, 2018).

Volunteer tourism advocacy itself often reflects this sense of an over-formalised global society and a lack of community, with a consequent desire to reconnect with other people on a more authentic basis through tourism (Conran, 2011). The sense of community in volunteer tourism projects, and the perception of authentic relationships within these communities, is evident in the accounts from tourists and also in academic analyses. Many of these emphasise personal and intimate encounters and friendships (Conran, 2011), and others also draw a contrast with a sense of a lack of community at home (Apale and Stam, 2011).

Volunteer tourism eschews the impersonal, distant forces and abstract theories associated with more established iterations of development. Instead it appeals to the building of communities – frequently projects that volunteers work on will be prefixed by 'community based' (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018; Lupoli, 2013; Lupoli et al., 2014). Advertising and advocacy of volunteer tourism is replete with implicit and explicit references to local community, in terms of helping the community, forging a sense of community and being a part of a community as a visitor (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018; Lupoli, 2013; Lupoli et al., 2014).

Accounts of volunteer tourism projects follow the emphasis on the local community in development above any reference to national development or macro-economic impacts (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018; Lupoli, 2013; Lupoli et al., 2014)). Neither in advocacy, marketing or academic accounts are there references to the wider economy or national economic development. The difference is to be made in 'the community', in situ, first-hand. It is there than the volunteer experiences others' poverty and can, personally, act upon it and witness for themselves the result of their actions. It is there that development of sorts, or at least 'making a difference', takes place (Butcher, 2015; Butcher and Smith, 2015).

The desire for authentic, personal bonds with local communities around the world is no doubt heartfelt, and some argue it may prompt political reflection (Conran, 2011; Griffiths, 2016). However, the link to development can certainly be questioned. Writing with reference to development volunteering one analysis notes that 'the focus on the local as the site of empowerment and knowledge circumscribes consciousness and action' (Mohan and Stokke, 2000: 251). Just as the *local* and *personal* open up as arenas for social agency *via* lifestyle-oriented channels, this is at the expense of any wider political reckoning on development. That is apt with regard to volunteer tourism's social aspirations, where affect may trump political framing (Butcher, 2015). The volunteer can act on issues they hold dear, but that agency exists only as personal, private initiative, and eschews public, political change.

The framing of the agency of volunteers' development efforts as personal projects is not the only, or perhaps even the main issue. The agency of the recipients of volunteers' assistance is also circumscribed. The community is generally presented as local but not national, private but not public, and its development prospects a practical rather than political question. In this way the talking up of *community* runs parallel to the depoliticisation of citizenship in development (Butcher, 2017). Members of communities are also members of sovereign nations with wider political and economic ambitions beyond the village or local level. Whatever one's view on what constitutes good development, the circumscription of agency involved in regarding volunteer tourism as a part of development assistance is a serious charge.

From economic transformation to localised natural limits

The growth of environmental concern as a qualification on development has also been crucial in the changing conception of the term. The modern environmental movement grew in importance through the 1970s, with the *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al., 1972) and Schumacher's (1973) *Small is Beautiful* being two landmark publications. The *World Conservation Strategy* of 1980 (IUCN, 1980) expressed the environmental critique of modern development, and the *Brundtland Report* of 1986 connected this more explicitly to economic growth (UN, 1987).

However, it is the 1992 *United Nations Conference on Development and the Environment* (often referred to as 'the Rio conference') that made sustainable development a new rhetorical orthodoxy shaping much public as well as academic discussion on development. Sustainable development can mean many things, but often carries a critical orientation towards economic development (Williams, 2008). This is certainly the case with regard to tourism development, where advocacy of sustainable tourism has often been equated with ecotourism or other small, green niches, whilst rhetorically eschewing popular mass tourism (Butcher, 2020; Wheeller, 1993). Lee and Zhang (2020) argue specifically that volunteer tourism has a role to play in contributing to 'sustainable development'.

One manifestation of the environmental critique – especially relevant due to its invocation in tourism studies – is the advocacy of 'degrowth' (Andriotis, 2018). Degrowth thinkers, amongst others, sever the link between economic growth and human progress, and connect the latter to a new form of society. This society is based on localism and a rejection of consumerism. It is justified on the basis that human happiness is ill served by economic growth (Hickel, 2020). Degrowth, whilst primarily an intellectual movement, is also championed by noted environmentalists from the global south such as Vandana Shiva, and arguably intersects with some grassroots campaigns against the impacts of development (Fletcher et al., 2019). Where development is divorced from growth and represented as a 'local' rather than national phenomenon, it becomes more conceivable to see volunteer tourism programmes as having the potential to contribute.

A common theme in community oriented volunteer tourism projects is ecodevelopment (Lin et al., 2023; Wearing, 2001). This involves working within existing relationships between people and their local environment. The United Nations define ecodevelopment as:

> . . . development at regional and local levels, consistent with the potentials of the area involved, with attention given to the adequate and rational use of natural resources, technological styles and organizational forms that respect the natural ecosystems and local social and cultural patterns. (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, undated)

This eschews the prospect of transforming these 'potentials' and 'patterns' through growth and technology, which was central to *development as modernisation* (Butcher, 2007). It is common for volunteer tourism projects to focus on assisting rural communities to adopt an ecodevelopment outlook, through, for example, the development of ecotourism or green rural tourism projects (Lin et al., 2023; Wearing, 2001).

Up until the 1980s development retained an association with economic transformation premised upon national economic growth. But progressively strands of development thought have retreated (or depending on your view, advanced) from that position. Development can now be discussed divorced from nation and national community, at the level of the locality and the local community. Development can be viewed as strongly contingent upon the relationship of local communities to local natural limits, rather than a process that liberates people from those limits. Unlike *development as modernisation*, the earlier iteration of development, ecodevelopment presents a version of development that volunteer tourists can realistically claim to be involved in in a meaningful way.

From growth to 'wellbeing', 'happiness' and 'conviviality'

Sen (1999), in his seminal *Development as Freedom*, invokes wellbeing. He sees it as closely related to the extension of 'freedoms' and 'capabilities'. These freedoms and capabilities are in turn associated with, albeit not determined by, economic development, involving growth. For Sen, wellbeing is not counter posed to *development as modernisation*.

However, it is often presented as such. For example, in Rahnema and Bawtree's (1997) influential edited collection of post-development thought, *The Post-Development Reader*, the authors invoke anthropologist Sahlins (1997) insights on development and happiness in *The Original Affluent Society*, claiming them as a tenet of post-development thinking. Sahlins argues:

> 'The world's most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of foods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends: above all, it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status'. (p. 19)

He argues that the assumptions of development held across the modernist political spectrum, make little sense: '. . .economic man is a bourgeois construction . . . It is not that hunter gatherers have curbed their materialistic 'impulses': they simply never made an institution of them' (p. 10).

This thinking chimes with the emphasis on happiness in volunteer tourism advertising and analysis, and the desire to sustain current ways of life rather than fund their transformation, in the name of development.

Think tanks, influential writers and non-governmental organisations focused on development have advocated for a wellbeing approach along these lines (McGregor and Gough, 2010). Many have adopted an approach more inclined towards psychological dimensions of human fulfilment, and much less inclined to economic growth (Chambers, 2005; McGregor and Gough, 2010; White, 2008). In fact a strong theme in the wellbeing literature is the sense in which these psychological dimensions are *antithetical* to economic development through growth.

According to Allister McGregor, (a professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies and director of the Bellagio Initiative, an initiative seeking to promote wellbeing in international development thinking):

> 'At the heart of the wellbeing approach is the recognition that we all aspire to live well – whether we are pastoralists in Somalia, factory workers in China or middle managers in the UK. True, it is clear that across the globe and between generations we all perceive wellbeing differently, but this general need to live well – to be content with the things that we have, the relationships that enable us to achieve our goals, and our feelings that we have about how well

> we are doing in life – is not bound by geography, culture, religion, age, politics or any other factor defining us'.
>
> (McGregor, 2011)

In this vein one advocate of wellbeing in development refers to 'doing well, feeling good and doing good, feeling well' to sum up wellbeing (White, 2008: 3). 'Doing well' refers to material aspects of life, 'feeling good' to the subjective. 'Doing good' refers to the relational aspects of life and 'feeling well' to health and happiness.

Theories of wellbeing focus on the relationship between these three categories: material, subjective and relational. Material factors are objective, in keeping with a more traditional view of development. But combined with these are the subjective and relational: how people feel about their lives and the importance of how a society or community relates beyond the individual respectively. Relational aspects of development are often expressed through discussions of social capital, like wellbeing, a concept originating in modern Western societies now often applied to the development of other societies.

Wellbeing is generally viewed as being 'ground[ed] in a particular social and cultural location' (White, 2008: 4). It is a product of the varied ways that societies are structured and the way they operate. This is a retreat from a more universal notion of development, one that claims applicability to all societies on the basis that human societies, whilst differentiated, share common aspirations in relation to material betterment and freedom (Chibber, 2013). Also, the relational emphasis of wellbeing has been viewed by its advocates as taking in 'love', 'care' and 'social capital' (White, 2008). This suggests that interventions in development could exist at the level of private and personal encounters – they need not be focused on material transformation at all.

Parallel to its growth in development debates, wellbeing has also emerged as a reference point domestically in recent years. One study locates the cultural emphasis on personal wellbeing in western societies as commencing in the 1990s (Sointu, 2005). Wellbeing holidays are marketed as a retreat from the stresses and strains of modern life and affluence itself. Whilst of course wellbeing is associated with enjoyable and relaxing activity, it can also reflect a cultural reaction against modern life towards spirituality (a 'retreat' from modern life, in both a literal and metaphorical sense). When used in the development context it encapsulates the divorce of development from economic growth (Andreoni and Galmarini, 2014; Paulson and Paulson-Smith, 2021). To 'feel well' in this context emphasises empathetic, non-economic, and post-material values.

So there is a sense in which 'wellness' is a shared form of 'development' for volunteer tourist and development recipient alike – for one, it involves respite from modernity, and for the other, marginal localised and personal benefits. Whilst material benefits may be marginal, and modernisation is off the table, both parties can 'do good' and 'feel well'.

Alongside wellbeing, recent years have witnessed the rise of 'happiness' in development thinking. Happiness emerged onto the intellectual scene principally through Layard's (2006) *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. This ground-breaking analysis considers how measuring development, or the quality of life, through wealth, has in some cases coincided with a decrease in people's perceptions of their actual happiness, and calls for a reorientation of policy towards the goal of increasing this elusive state. President Sarkozy in France and Prime Minster David Cameron in the UK are two politicians who publicly tried to incorporate happiness into economic thinking and policy in the 2000s. According to Cameron, who established a ‘happiness unit’ in the UK government, ‘It’s time we admitted that there’s more to life than money and it’s time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB – general wellbeing’ (cited in Stratton, 2010). This is striking, reflecting a degree of reorientation away from macroeconomic targets towards psychological and interpersonal dimensions of development.

A number of authors have taken aim at the rise of happiness in politics generally (Davies, 2016; Frawley, 2015). Frawley in her book *Semiotics of Happiness: Rhetorical Beginnings of a Public Problem* argues convincingly that policies based around happiness, in the workplace and politics generally general, involve psychological interventions into the lives of others, interventions that carry their own assumptions about those others. This is an important perspective that relates to volunteer tourism. Do the voluntoured need help in caring for their children and sustaining their local environments – two common aims of voluntourism projects? Did they request this? Do they lack local labour or skills to build a school house ? Where is the democratic accountability over this development assistance, given it operates through civil society and not formal political channels ?

William Davies refers in his book *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being (2016)* to the occasion of a Buddhist monk lecturing the world’s leaders on mindfulness at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos. It is a striking image that speaks to a mainstreaming of happiness that fails to address the material conditions that may lead to unhappiness. If poverty and a lack of economic opportunity contribute to unhappiness, interventions that offer friendship and psychological wellbeing without the hope of changing the conditions of life would seem an incredibly limited development agenda.

Nonetheless happiness is seen as important for development practice by influential post-development thinker on rural development Robert Chambers. He advocates ‘improvisation’ involving ‘fun’ and ‘playfulness’ as important for development workers, to enable barriers to be broken down, and also as a respite from the stresses of modern life (Chambers, 1997: 2007; 2002). That Chambers encourages ‘being nice to people’ (Chambers, 1997: 2007; 2002) in the context of development indicates an incredible personalisation of development. Fun, playfulness and being nice are qualities associated with tourism. Yet here they are part of a serious and influential view of rural development. This is a framing of development that volunteer tourism can sit comfortably within.

Another expression of the trend towards associating development with happiness in everyday life that has found some favour amongst academics examining tourism is the Bhutanese idea of ‘Gross National Happiness’ (Rinzin et al., 2007). This involves measuring changes to people’s happiness, or aspects of lives deemed to be associated with a happy life, as a counter to gross national product, the traditional, economic measure of development (McCarthy, 2018). This Bhutanese innovation has also been lauded by the United Nations and is a popular normative point of reference for many academics critical of development as modernisation (McCarthy, 2018), including in tourism (Rastegar et al., 2023).

The happiness approach resonates with the development aspirations of volunteer tourism. As one volunteer tourism advocate reflects, ‘maybe happiness is not about affluence’ (Mahrouse, 2011: 373). Images of happiness are replete in volunteer tourism marketing. The aspiration to ‘bring a little happiness’ or to ‘bring a smile’ to someone is common in volunteer tourists’ accounts of their travels (Conran, 2011). If the pursuit of happiness is a development aim, then volunteer tourism becomes a vehicle for development in a fashion that would have been regarded at best as frivolous a generation ago.

A third concept of note is ‘conviviality’. The degrowth movement was formally launched at the Paris conference of 2008 and is associated with post-development thinking. Alongside its advocacy for a scaling down of economic activity and localisation of economic circuits, it also calls for a culture of ‘conviviality’ (Latouche, 2009). For Latouche, conviviality refers to a slower, more localised society within which inter-personal culture would be enriched at a much lower level of consumption (Latouche, 2009). Here again we have a strand of development thought that focuses upon values of friendship and interpersonal encounters, emphasising a sensibility of care. The promotion of conviviality as an aim of development resonates with, for example, the desire of volunteers to bring a little respite to children and the vulnerable through play and companionship.

Conclusion: Volunteer tourism as a public face of development for our times

The meaning of development has certainly changed. Development as modernisation was characterised by: the sovereign nation state as the agent of development; the national community of citizens as the potential beneficiaries, and; economic and social transformation through growth. This framing of development precluded something like volunteer tourism from being regarded as development. Volunteering that did take place – through the Peace Corps and comparable initiatives – was linked to development as modernisation and was only ever referred to as ‘tourism’ as an ironic criticism (Zimmerman, 2008). ‘Tourism’ and ‘development’ were quite different things, belonging to different aspects of life and different conversations.

Post-development calls into question each of the above parameters of development: the critique of the state shifts emphasis to the role of civil society in development; the ‘local community’ has been increasingly invoked as the potential beneficiary of development projects (and the basis for participation in the development process); localised natural limits to development are commonly proposed as a counter to grand development schemas, and; subjective aims, such as ‘wellbeing’, ‘happiness’ and ‘conviviality’ are now included as development aims, often counter posed to economic growth. If development can be enacted at local level through small scale initiatives, need not involve economic transformation, seeks to support rural societies in their existing way of life and to enhance happiness, then volunteer tourism becomes conceivable as ‘development’.

In this respect, volunteer tourism is one example of a wider trend reflecting the changed thinking on development. The large set-piece charitable initiatives for development, such as Live Aid and Red Nose Day, alongside Fairtrade, ethical consumption and charity challenges have, from the 1980s, presented development to a concerned public as an issue for personal action in the private sphere rather than political action in the public sphere (Barnett et al., 2011; Chouliaraki, 2012; York-Wooten, 2015).

Chouliaraki (2012) argues that development is presented to the public today less as a question of geopolitics and ideology (as under *development as modernisation* with its attendant assumptions of the prominence of states, national citizens and economic and social transformation), and more one of acts of charity or private consumption when confronted with images of poverty and destitution. This certainly seems true with regard to volunteer tourism. Private, personal values of care and awareness have advanced and public, ideological understandings of development in the global South retreated (Chouliaraki, 2012). The former are values that closely align with those of volunteer tourists (Conran, 2011).

It remains true that choices of leisure consumers are intimately connected to political context and identities. It is also true that volunteer tourism remains, for many undertaking it, a laudable and heartfelt attempt to make a difference – to exhibit agency, to act upon the world. But that context and those identities are themselves shaped by the contemporary politics of development: when it comes to volunteering, ‘love operate(s) within political limits’ (Cobbs-Hoffman, 1998).

This has consequences for critiques of volunteer tourism. There is a considerable amount of criticism of volunteer tourists and gap year project participants on the basis that they do not really help the societies they visit (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Mustonen, 2007). The criticism itself may be fair, but at the same time may be misdirected. Volunteer tourism can be associated with development only because influential ’alternative’ development ideas themselves have become aligned with small scale, local interventions and personal change, and delinked from transformative economic development. Volunteer tourism is a product of that realignment in development thinking.

There are material consequences too. Economist Ha-Joon Chang, identified a modern development-speak in which economic development itself does not feature: what he characterised as ‘Hamlet without the Prince off Denmark’, a play in which the main character is absent (2010). Critiques of volunteer tourism should consider it as a cultural symptom of contemporary development-speak.

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