Introduction

Dr. Bruce Currie-Alder, Director of the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa presented the key findings of International Development: Ideas, Experience, and Prospects\(^1\), a book co-edited by himself, Ravi Kanbur, David M. Malone, and Rohinton Medhora.

The End of the Foreign Aid Era and the Broadening of ‘International Development’

Bruce Currie-Alder explained that the IDRC is a research-funding organization with a vision to support knowledge innovation solutions that improve the lives of people in the developing world. The ideas put forth by him during this talk have been based on the book, his own analysis, and his co-editors’ analysis.

According to Currie-Alder, one of the key lessons that can be taken away from this book is the absence of a ‘scientific revolution’ in the Kuhnian sense of the term, that the mainstream paradigm of thought in international development was suddenly replaced by another. Instead there was an accumulation of ideas, theories and concepts over time such that the ideas of Adam Smith and Amartya Sen are still relevant and insightful today despite the fact that there are centuries between these two authors.

Throughout the book, the co-editors tried to address the gap between three academic disciplines: development economics, development studies and international relations. Accordingly, over the past 60 to 70 years they observed the changing notion of how success is described and evaluated. After the 1950s - during which scholarship was focused on infrastructure, national economic growth, and the economy - the discourse evolved to include

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reducing poverty, improving health and ecological sustainability, strengthening good governance, and more recently, enhancing security. In general, there is a trend to expand the scope to include the ideas of well-being, equity and human freedom.

**The Move from ‘Big Development’ to ‘Small Development’**

Another shift Currie-Alder pointed to is the move from ‘big development’ to ‘small development’. During the 1950s through to the 1970s, a lot of the development thought focused on grand historical narratives of how societies were changing. More recently, there has been an emergence of ‘small development’: modest changes in the well-being of individuals and groups within societies rather than wholesale social change.

Currie-Alder also contended that the phrase ‘international development’ may soon become extinct and replaced by three broadening categorizations thereof:

- Sovereign issues addressed by domestic public policy within a nation state: What is the use of national wealth to look after citizens?
- Common cross-border issues that require cooperation across nation states, such as public health.
- Foreign issues, such as poverty in the conflict-ridden ungoverned spaces abroad.

**Three Models of Changes in Thinking, Practice, and Influencing Policy**

Drawing on IDRC’s experience and the insights from the book, Currie-Alder identified three different models of changes in thinking, practice, and influencing policy.

The first model addresses policy recommendations, which should be implemented by the government. For examples of success, Currie-Alder referred to AUB’s tobacco control policy and IDRC’s involvement in many governments’ transition periods, including those of post-apartheid South Africa and Chile. The second model addresses ‘how to do’, often involving models of technology and pilots of approaches that might later be adopted. The third model addresses sense-making, or ‘how to understand’. This focuses on enhancing citizens’ policy literacy and numeracy.

As for the question of the role of civil society and academia in policy-making, Currie-Alder offered that instead of focusing on visibility, what really matters is not the nodes in a social network but rather the linkages: who we are connected to, how strong these connections are, and the nature of the flow of problem-solving and sense-making in society.

In conclusion, Currie-Alder explained the idea behind the provocative title of the book. It is an intentional play on words based on Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, in which the 1990s were argued to be the ‘end of history’ because of the end of the Cold War. Similarly, the era of foreign aid and international development as we know it is coming to an end. International development is transforming into the aforementioned three dialogues: sovereign, common, and foreign issues. The ‘beginning of history’ refers to the end of the

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2 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 2006).
West’s foreign intervention and its gravitation towards dialogue, giving countries the chance to determine their own future.

‘International Development’ and the Arab Region

Samir Makdisi, Emeritus Professor of Economics at the American University of Beirut, described the book as a very comprehensive volume that offers the reader a comprehensive survey of the major aspects of evolution of development thought and how the development process has fared in various regions and countries in the post-second world war period.

Makdisi offered that the volume illustrates how the notion of development has expanded beyond its economic dimension. Developmental concerns are no longer confined to the question of how to generate economic growth but expanded to include the questions of how to manage the fruits of growth, investing in health, in social safety networks, achieving a fairer society, and enriching democracy. Hence it is not surprising that there are ever present tensions in the development discourse, such as growth vs. distribution, market vs. state, etc.

Developmental experiences teach us that the extent to which development works depends on particular local, historical, or institutional contexts. Thus general policy prescriptions will fail if the necessary conditions that make development work are absent. Hence there is no one single recipe for development (e.g., China, Korea, Lebanon, Chile), a fact which some international organizations do not account for appropriately.

Bringing in the regional perspective, Makdisi saw that socioeconomic growth in the Arab region (post-independence) was not accompanied by significantly greater democratic space. Autocratic rule continued to reign despite economic development - a phenomenon often referred to as Arab exceptionalism. The Arab uprisings initiated in late December 2010 are yet (Tunisia apart) to yield, if at all, enhanced democratic governance.

There are three major underlying factors that explain the phenomenon of Arab autocracy: abundance of oil resources, a highly conflictual region, and foreign interventions. It is only when we factor in the impact of oil resources and conflicts (including the Arab-Israeli conflict) that we can explain the entrenchment of Arab autocracy. Admittedly, the recent uprisings may have opened the door to democracy in the region, but only partly.

Thus, Makdisi concluded, one can observe that the Arab experience illustrates the notion that there is no one set path to development, and institutions and special circumstances play a crucial role in determining the political and economic trajectory of individual countries and regions. The Arab experience seems to corroborate the view that grand theories of development are on the decline.