

Learning as Development: Rethinking International Education in a Changing World

reviewed by Ademola Akinrinola, Susan Ogwal & Cameron McCarthy – October 01, 2018

Title: Learning as Development: Rethinking International Education in a Changing World

Author(s): Daniel A. Wagner

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In *Learning as Development*, Daniel A. Wagner offers a timely intervention in the discussion of what cluster of policies and orientations might help accelerate stalled processes in underdeveloped countries in order to foster change and growth. Since the decade after WWII, this area of research has fallen under the banner of what is called development, and its related disciplinary field came to be known as development studies. Wagner, despite his protestation, is writing in this tradition even as he seeks to condemn and revise it. A starting point for the author, then, is the way in which development is imagined in the first place, and the traditional paradigm which stresses indices of economic growth and education expansion as the sine qua non of societal modernization and maturity. In this development model, the strength or weakness of a nation's economy determines its overall level of growth as measured by GNP, GDP per capita, etc., the implication being that economic growth and expansion result in the diffusion and wide dissemination of social and economic rewards and enhanced quality of life among citizens of developing countries. But this development model, as Wagner argues in the book, is not sustainable; it bypasses too many sectors of the poor, non-urban, and minority language groups who are outside the reach of central government powers and corporate entities that both absorb and distribute material rewards unequally in the third world. Wagner explores case after case in which "vital resources may or may not 'trickle down' to fulfil the needs and values of ordinary individuals" (p. 2).

As an alternative, Wagner invites readers to consider a more equitable, sustainable model which he calls human development. Much of the book offers insights into "what international development would look like if economics were not the primary yardstick for measuring national success" (p. 2). The human development model as elaborated by Wagner is learning-centered. It seeks to move beyond traditional approaches that are inattentive to the environmental costs of economic and industry-driven development and whose crude measures leave so many behind. Wagner dives deep into the elaboration of an alternative, psychosocial development framework that places a considerable amount of emphasis on individual agency, somewhat regardless of circumstances. For him, widely diffused, knowledge-based competencies centered on elevating human capabilities such as cognition, linguistic proficiency (e.g., bridging the gap between dominant and minority languages), and general adaptive agency will liberate more people in developing countries from the present tyranny of exclusion and lack of opportunity.

With numerous statistical figures, charts, graphs, and illustrative vignettes and case study reports, Wagner builds out his alternative approach to international development. He starts with the provision of foundational material on key terms: international development, human development, and learning. His survey of current scholarship in these areas is crisp and illuminating. Wagner is a compelling storyteller, and the book is chock-full of stories from case studies, such as that of Izel of central Yucatan, whose lack of proficiency in Mexico's dominant language, Spanish, cuts her out of jobs in the emerging tourist economy on the Yucatan's Caribbean coast. These illustrations are helpful, but they often appear to depict one-dimensional figures of third-world individuals in a manner that borders on caricature. For Wagner, the world is divided between third-world and first-world countries. Development exists in countries like the United States and Western Europe and underdevelopment is a tragic feature of countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. We never really get to see a sustained comparative analytical vision that would follow inequality and underdevelopment across this first-world/third-world divide. Though the term "international" would seem to warrant a holistic perspective, taking us around the world (including to the United States), Wagner does very little to include Western, first-world examples of developmental stasis, poverty, or deprivation that might reveal transnational, structural, and class-based phenomena that impact the fate of social actors across nations.

Learning as Development is divided into four parts, taking the reader from foundational and historical discussions of key terms to explorations of the structural limits of current educational institutions and trends and challenges for the future.

In Part One, through the lens of "contemporary development," Wagner challenges the notion of past development ideals. Along the way, Wagner reflexively credits colonialism and colonial powers for jump-starting development in the third world. Here, one may very well question where he plans to take this thinking, but he proceeds to blandly acknowledge that colonialism benefited some while oppressing others. He also continues to push the reader to somehow see colonialism as the catalyst for the early formations of international development (p. 9). In this way, he depoliticizes and limits the critique of contemporary development theories. Wagner seems particularly ignorant or insensible to theories coming out of the work of third-world scholars of the dependency theory school, who argue that underdevelopment was not an original state of affairs in third-world countries, but was in fact an effect of the

structural, economic, and cultural processes that propelled Europe's development (e.g., Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* or Andre Gunder Frank's *The Development of Underdevelopment*).

In Part Two, Wagner seems on more secure ground. He shares with readers shrewd insights on a range of human development and cognition subjects, the central issue of investment in early childhood education and environments, the importance of nurturing basic skills, and youth transition to adulthood. In particular, Wagner flags policy imperatives regarding early learning, paying special attention to parent and child interaction. Through the extensive use of graphs and tables, Wagner offers plenty of evidence to show that the returns on early investment in childhood education and cognitive development are huge, and that they exceed the returns on spending at later stages in the education trajectory of young people. While middle class parents have grasped this, increasingly choosing to provide early stimuli for their children, third-world governments have not, disproportionately spending educational dollars on secondary and tertiary education.

Parts Three and Four bring together a host of challenges for education institutions and for the future beyond the classroom. Whether it is the teacher-to-student ratio or access to educational technology, Wagner sees present policy and deployment of resources as frustrating the learning-based human development model which he thinks is urgently needed to replace the dominant economic industrial model. Referring back to the learning model he advances earlier in the book, Wagner underscores its relevance to the policy challenges of global development. His argument takes on a decidedly environmentalist tone as he endorses the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development articulated in the September 2015 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. Here, too, he confronts issues of population growth, migration, difficulties in situations such as civil conflict, urbanization, and environmental threats and challenges. Wagner ultimately asks the reader to reconsider what international development truly means as he promotes the idea of "a global citizenry that is continuously learning" (p. 213).

CONCLUSION

All in all, Wagner is passionate about learning. From a survey of previous studies to his personal experience, he confronts readers with a powerful articulation of his thesis on development. There is, he maintains, a critical need for learning to be added to the development model now informing governmental policy in the third world. Wagner's book is eminently readable, even as it is at times marked by a problematic Eurocentrism and a sense of talking down to third-world policymakers and stakeholders. We believe, for instance, that the author too glibly gives a pass to imperialism and the persistence of neocolonial relationships between Western powers and the third world. In throwing out the economic model of development, he has also thrown out the extraordinary political economic scholarship of dependency theorists and of global studies and postcolonial scholars who have identified patterns of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" that continue to distort development. Wagner treats development and underdevelopment as spatially and historically separate processes operating in different zones of the globe. As compelling as his insights are on rethinking economic development models, this book avoids a bold comparative engagement with the transnational roots of underdevelopment and the expanding unequal relations between third-world societies and the West, even in zones of knowledge production and learning.

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