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# The Failure and Nightmare of International Development

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**Abstract**
**Objective:** This research study critically evaluates Arturo Escobar's 1995 assertion that the post- 1950s international development project, instead of delivering prosperity, resulted in widespread underdevelopment, exploitation, and oppression. It investigates the extent to which international development, driven by capitalism and globalization, has failed to achieve its stated objectives, particularly in the Global South, using some African countries as case studies for illustration.
**Method**: The study employs a qualitative and critical analytical approach, drawing on a multi- disciplinary review of historical accounts, scholarly literature, policy documents, and real-world case studies focused on African nations. It evaluates the theoretical foundations of development, the structural influence of global economic institutions, and the socioeconomic outcomes of key international policies like Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).
**Results:** The analysis reveals that international development has often served the interests of Western industrialized countries rather than those of the developing world. Capitalism and globalization, while promising growth, have fostered global inequalities and allowed transnational corporations and institutions such as the IMF and World Bank to impose neoliberal policies that negatively impact local economies and populations. African case studies demonstrate how these dynamics have contributed to increased poverty, weakened local industries, and socio-political instability.
**Conclusion:** This research supports Escobar's critique that the dominant development paradigm has largely failed to promote equitable and inclusive progress. Instead, it has facilitated colonial-era patterns of dominance and dependency under a neoliberal guise. A fundamental shift that fosters local agency, social justice, and sustainable, context-driven policies over profit-driven globalization is necessary to ensure development becomes truly transformative.

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**Keywords:** International development, underdevelopment, Arturo Escobar, IMF, World Bank, Global North, Global South, capitalism, globalization, Africa, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), neoliberalism, inequality, transnational institutions

## Introduction

English poet John Keats once wrote that nothing ever becomes real until experienced – that even a proverb lacks truth until it manifests in human lives. Keats reminded his brother George and his wife Georgina that "nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced" since even caring for others requires space for subjectivity, attention to lived experiences, and the messy realities of individual lives (Sinha, 2025) [14]. Keats' statement underscores the disjunction between theory and lived reality, a theme that resonates well in the discourse on development. Theory, planning, and expectation are important aspects of the economic world. Development is essential to long-term planning, theory, and expectation in economics. For several decades since the 19th century, scholars, politicians, and society viewed economic development as a positive and beneficial process characterized by rising incomes, expanding investment, and enhanced well-being.

Most importantly, the expectation was that economic development would promote equitable and inclusive prosperity across all societies and nations. Yet, a growing body of critical scholarship and lived experience suggests otherwise. Many individuals now believe that development has failed to realize its promises and has instead become a vehicle for oppression and exploitation. Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995) captured this sense of disillusionment, writing, "This dream (of development) progressively turned into a nightmare. For, instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression."

This research paper critically evaluates Arturo Escobar's statement, employing African examples to substantiate his argument. In his book "Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World," Escobar uncovered the epistemological underpinnings of international development and highlighted the practical effects of this foundation on 'third world' countries (Akinkunmi, 2021) [1]. Therefore, this study agrees with Escobar's assessment by emphasizing that international development has largely failed to deliver equitable and inclusive outcomes globally. Instead, it has fostered systems of exploitation and oppression, largely through capitalism and globalization. Globalization has strengthened and fortified capitalism's adverse processes and impacts by creating a new, transnational class of capitalists and a scheme of capitalism to prioritize and protect the interests of a few wealthy countries/societies. Besides, the development process has featured the capitalist and oppressive agendas of wealthy, industrialized Western nations that control and exploit developing or third-world economies. The developed West is focused on serving its economic and political interests rather than helping and empowering developing countries to attain genuine and sustainable improvements in citizens' quality of life. The entrenched systems of exploitation and oppression have consolidated the power and interests of the transnational capitalist elite by promoting the dominance of wealthy, Western industrialized countries over the poor, developing nations. Based on Arturo Escobar's assessment, international development has not served the needs of the Global South. Still, it has primarily advanced the economic and political interests of the Global North, perpetuating stark global inequalities and structural impoverishment.

Development has long been a central objective of the international community. In 1997, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution (A/RES/51/240), which defined development as a multidimensional process aimed at achieving and sustaining a higher quality of life for all people (U.N., 1997). While the resolution views economic growth as a foundation for development—through secure employment, adequate housing, and eradicating poverty, disease, hunger, and illiteracy—it also highlights other equally critical components: democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, accountable and transparent governance, and active participation of civil society in governance and societal processes. The resolution further emphasized that development must be inclusive and equitable to be genuine and sustainable. Development can only be authentic, effective, and sustainable if it benefits all segments of society. Inclusive development involves creating productive and profitable jobs, providing efficient and effective social nets to individuals who cannot work or those with minimal access to development, offering basic public services, and ensuring adequate public policy support (Widianingsih *et al*., 2024) [16]. The implication is clear: development should empower societies and their members to meet their needs and improve their quality of life over the long term. Economic development is a gradual, long-term process involving positive societal transformation and empowerment. "Development" is the process or state of continuing improvement. In socioeconomic terms, development entails progressive improvement in people's lives through enhanced income, education, employment, and skills. Socioeconomic factors facilitate social and economic empowerment, enabling individuals and communities to fulfil their aspirations sustainably.

Development is not merely about GDP growth; it is about qualitative transformation. In recent decades, the assessment of economic growth has shifted from national income accounting to human-oriented measurements (Mkrtchyan & Navasardyan, 2024) [9]. Economic development contributes to a positive, qualitative change in the lives and experiences of society members. The development combines economic growth—an increase in the economic wealth of countries—and other positive qualitative changes, like improvements in governance, human rights, public services, and environmental sustainability. Niaz (2021) [10] asserts that effective development entails poverty reduction, improved literacy and education, higher living standards, healthier environments, and sustainable livelihoods. Frameworks such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect this in-depth understanding of development. However, these goals remain unattainable without inclusivity and equity since they limit development's effectiveness, genuineness, and sustainability. Moreover, Nina (2021) argues that sustainable livelihoods, reducing poverty, and enhancing human rights are essential to transforming societies progressively and positively towards a higher quality of life. Its credibility and sustainability are severely compromised when development excludes or marginalizes large population segments. This comprehensive understanding of development is central to the critical assessment of the success of the development paradigm as envisioned by political leaders and scholars/theorists in the 1950s.

## Roles and impacts of capitalism and globalization in international development

The history of international development is evident in the process of industrialization. The Industrial Revolution marked a significant socioeconomic turning point, transforming Western societies from agrarian, low-productivity economies to highly productive, industrialized ones (NG, n.d.). The transformation was driven by technological innovation, which enabled the mechanization of agriculture and manufacturing, promoted urbanization, and significantly increased wealth, investment, and consumer markets in Western societies. The key drivers of these changes in Western society were capitalism and globalization, which have been essential in international development. The West created and sustained the global capitalist system to serve its ideological and economic hegemony at the expense of oppressing Africa through forced integration and unequal power relations (Onah & Amujiri,

2023) [11]. Therefore, discussing international development without assessing the characteristics and impacts of capitalism and globalization is impossible. The primary feature of global development is productive economic activity, which rests on the driving forces of private ownership of productive assets or means of production, profit motives, and the availability and expansion of markets for produced goods or services. The economic progress of international development is measured based on a neo-liberalistic and capitalistic framework that emphasizes individual wealth accumulation over collective well-being and highlights short-term gains over long-term sustainability (Zhu, 2022) [17]. It promotes lasting change in business activity, economic growth, and the well-being of Western societies. The Industrial Revolution contributed to Western society's long-term economic growth and development.

Capitalism has been the principal and dominant system of economic production in international development. Jawan and Mahmud (2015) [7] described capitalism as an economic system in which private actors own and control property in pursuit of their personal interests. Possession of property constitutes the means of production, which is deployed to create goods and services for markets based on supply and demand. The defining characteristics of capitalism include private ownership of productive assets, market availability for goods and services, and the primacy of profit as the driving motive behind production. Owners of means of production apply their rights over their property to obtain income and earnings for use in the production of services/goods. Prominent economist Adam Smith famously argued that in serving their self- interest, capitalists indirectly meet society's needs (Arevuo, 2023) [2]. However, this assumption presupposes that the pursuit of profit inherently aligns with societal well-being—an assumption that has been increasingly contested in global development. The profit incentive and desire to maximize profits from using means of production are the primary motivations of economic output, growth, and development. According to Jahan and Mahmud (2015) [7], a capitalist economic system features several processes, including the private ownership and control of capital assets, such as factories and transportation systems, and the purchasing of labor for monetary wages. Other features of a capitalist economy involve the accrual of capital gains (profits from the use of production capital) to the private owners of capital and the allocation of capital and labor between competing uses depending on the choices and interests of capital owners. These aspects of capitalism are essential foundations of economic development since they provide incentives for allocating and using capital for economic production.

The foundation of capitalism as an economic system consists of several key pillars. The pillars include private property rights over tangible and intangible assets, freedom of self-interest (often at the expense of collective welfare), competition, market-based pricing, and minimal government intervention (Jahan & Mahmud, 2015) [7]. Examples of tangible assets include land, factories, and transportation, while intangible assets include bonds and stocks. Self-interest involves the freedom of actors to pursue their own good, often without regard for the interests of other actors in an economy or society. Competition allows enterprises to enter and exit industries or markets and pursue goals based on producers' interests. To maximize producers' interests, companies must consider and fulfill consumers' needs and expand markets for their products. Market mechanism determines prices based on interactions between buyers and sellers. The limited role of government in market mechanisms provides a conducive economic environment for production and trade. The pillars of capitalism foster production by empowering producers or capital owners to apply their resources effectively in economic output and obtain revenues and incomes from economic activity.

**Capitalism leads to the concentration of wealth among a few members of society**

One of capitalism's main contradictions is that it incentivizes productivity and innovation but also fosters inequality and exploitation. Capitalism is based on Western colonial history with powerful cultural narratives prioritizing private ownership, competition, and profit, leading to an individualistic syndrome of selfish striving at the expense of the community (Bettache, 2024) [3]. Maximizing profit from economic activities drives capitalists to exploit markets, labor, and natural resources, often in regions with weak labor protections or governance. In particular, capitalism aims to derive the most significant possible levels of income and profit from economic production through the payment of the least possible level of wages to labor and the sale of products and services at the highest possible level of prices (Jahan & Mahmud, 2015) [7]. These features and goals of capitalism are essential foundations of income and wealth inequalities in economic growth and development. The accrual of profits to owners of capital fosters inequalities in society as these owners become wealthy and sustain their distinct social class apart from the labor class (workers who provide labor services in economic production for wages). Globalization enables capital to move freely across borders while labor remains immobile and vulnerable. In this context, developing countries—particularly in Africa—become resource bases and cheap labor markets for transnational corporations headquartered in the Global North. Consequently, capitalism and economic growth and development based on capitalism inevitably lead to societal wealth inequalities (Jahan & Mahmud, 2015) [7]. Thus, while capitalism is often credited with promoting economic growth and development, it simultaneously perpetuates systemic inequalities and underdevelopment in many parts of the world. This paradox is central to understanding why development, as envisioned in the 1950s, has failed to materialize for many nations and why Escobar's critique remains profoundly relevant today.

Over the past two centuries, globalization has been among the most essential socioeconomic forces in international development. Globalization describes the growing interdependence and integration among the world's economies and societies and, consequently, the diminishing role and impact of physical and cultural barriers in interactions among these economies and societies (Irani & Noruzi, 2011) [6]. Technology is a primary driver of globalization because it has created new and more efficient ways of interaction among the world's economies and societies and reduced the role of physical barriers, such as huge distances and cultural differences, in these interactions (Blomkvist *et al*., 2021) [20]. It has made the world a "village" by enabling convenient and comprehensive interactions among its societies and economies. Globalization has enabled companies to extend their operations and activities beyond their domestic markets and economies. Irani and Noruzi (2011) [6] emphasized that globalization has increased the popularity of Western political and economic cultures and values globally. Most of the technologies and products that have contributed to the world's globalization are Western, thus leading to a close relationship between the processes of globalization and Westernization. At the same time, a key practical feature of globalization has been transmitting Western values, norms, and policies worldwide, contributing to the West's (and particularly the United States') hegemonic control over the world and its economies and societies. Irani and Noruzi (2011) [6] noted that, in effect, scholars and political activists have characterized globalization as Americanization and Westernization in its strictest sense. Globalization features and effects are essential in evaluating the effectiveness and success or failure of international development.

As a phenomenon, globalization has significantly shaped the process and outcomes of international development, both positively and adversely. Proponents argue that globalization has enhanced opportunities for nations, economies, and firms to achieve enhanced growth and development (Irani & Noruzi, 2011) [6]. Their claim is particularly evident in the rise and expansion of American multinational enterprises and conglomerates such as Microsoft, Walmart, Procter & Gamble, Oracle, Apple Inc., Tesla, Amazon, and Meta Platforms over the past few decades. Globalization has enabled these multinationals to achieve substantial profits through expanded operations, contributing to economic growth in their home countries. Globalization has reinforced capitalism by enabling optimal capital deployment to maximize returns for corporate owners and investors (Özelli, 2021) [12]. However, this reinforcement of capitalism through globalization has adversely impacted poorer nations and their economies. It has allowed dominant Western firms to exploit labor, markets, and resources in developing regions, particularly in Africa, to serve the interests of their owners and home economies (Irani & Noruzi, 2011) [6]. Consequently, globalization has exacerbated the inequalities inherent in capitalism by globalizing income and wealth disparities between developed and less-developed countries. The widening inequality demonstrates how globalization and capitalism undermine international development goals by making them less equitable and inclusive.

Examining the dimensions of globalization is essential when evaluating its impact on the effectiveness and success of international development. Robinson (n.d.) identified four key dimensions of globalization that significantly impact the success and effectiveness of international development. The first dimension is the expansion of capital and labor to a global scale, thus creating genuinely global markets that surpass national or regional economies. The second dimension involves the rise of a new transnational capitalist class—economic elites who control worldwide capital and markets to maximize profits without regard for national development goals (Eichenberger *et al*., 2023) [4]. The third dimension entails the emergence of transnational states—loosely organized yet powerful networks of economic and political alliances like the European Union and G7—that work to protect the interests of powerful economies and dominant global powers rather than supporting the equitable development of all nations. The fourth dimension concerns the emergence and intensification of new systems of international power and dominance that have increased global income and wealth inequality by forming strategic alliances to safeguard their capitalist and economic interests at the expense of weaker nations. These dimensions highlight how globalization institutionalizes, legitimizes, and fosters unequal and non-inclusive development that favors already wealthy nations at the expense of less-developed countries, contrary to the foundational goals of international development—to uplift all nations and create shared prosperity.

**Case/Examples of the failure of development in African countries**

One of the key elements in which globalization and capitalism undermine international development and developing nations is through the strategic use of transnational institutions by Western industrialized countries to advance their economic agendas. Igwe (2018) [5] argues that advanced Western economies have weaponized Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to further their economic dominance. They use these institutions as tools to prioritize and protect their economic interests and perpetuate unequal and non-inclusive international development. Wealthy Western nations have used their leadership and controlling roles (including their veto powers) in these institutions to impose neoliberal economic policies, such as deregulation and free trade, on developing countries, compelling them to open their markets to foreign goods and services. The strategy enables Western corporations to penetrate and dominate developing nations' markets while undermining local industries' growth, making them economically dependent on the West. These institutions' leadership structures and policy agendas reflect the disproportionate influence of Western countries, which often alienate the voices and interests of the Global South. The West dominates the WTO's leadership, agendas, and policies (Sinha, 2021) [13], enabling them to manipulate developing nations' markets and economic activities by enforcing unjust economic policies that favor developed countries. The prominent roles of Western industrialized nations in transnational organizations' decisions and policy processes alienate the interests of developing countries by exploiting and impoverishing their economies and societies. The structural imbalance fosters an international trade system that prioritizes the West's economic agendas and facilitates developing nations' economic subordination.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) represent one of the most notable examples of strategic Western economic exploitation of poor African countries to undermine their economic development and impoverish their societies for the West's selfish benefits. Taye (2022) [15] argued that SAPs have brought significant socio-political and economic crises to contemporary Africa. SAPs are conditions that international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, place on low-income countries, including African nations, when their governments borrow funds from them. According to Ogwe (2018), because the funding for these loans originates largely from wealthy countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, the lending institutions function as extensions of Western economic policy. The loans the IMF and World Bank lend to developing nations allow them to take control of their economies. Emeagwali (2011) [18] and Kingston *et al*. (2011) [8] argue that SAPs are grounded in neoliberal ideology and require the borrowing countries to implement policies such as currency devaluation, the liberalization of markets, the privatization of public industries, and the removal of subsidies on essential services like education and health. Besides, the programs impose changes on government procurement systems, labor laws, civil service operations, and energy policies. A particularly harmful requirement involves the complete exposure of nascent domestic industries to global market forces—often before they are equipped to compete. SAPs prioritize debt repayment over public investment, with over half national budgets sometimes diverting to creditor payments (Emeagwali, 2011) [18]. These conditions imply that developing African countries effectively transform into mechanisms for Western profit accumulation by borrowing funds from the World Bank and the IMF. They decrease the shares of African countries in world trade by reducing their exports and increasing their dependence on imported products from Western countries. Long-term outcomes involve socioeconomic deterioration through deeper poverty, hunger, weakened productivity, economic stagnation, and poor public health.

Three African countries' cases—Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Zimbabwe—underscore the critical role that Western-backed IMF and World Bank SAPs play in undermining the economic growth and development of low-income nations. Kingston *et al*. (2011) [8] state that the World Bank and IMF used SAPs to compel Ivory Coast to privatize its cocoa industry between 1988 and 1995. The transition doubled the poverty rate—from 17.8% to 37%—and halted GDP growth. The urgency to increase agricultural output led to child labor exploitation in cocoa, cotton, and coffee farms. Reduced public spending on education and health adversely impacted citizens' social well- being and led to a mass exodus of skilled labor. Moreover, the country's external debt rose from $7.4 billion in 1980 to $17.7 billion in 1990. In Senegal, Kingston *et al*. (2011) [8] argued that IMF- World Bank SAPs implemented between 1994 and 2002 caused the national debt to rise significantly, representing 86.2%, 80.1%, and 71.3% of GDP in 1994, 1996, and 2000, respectively. Consequently, the WB and IMF classified Senegal under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative in 2000. In Zimbabwe, Kingston *et al*. (2011) [8] emphasized that liberalization measures, reduced protections for manufacturers, and cuts in public spending enhanced the impact of the 1992 drought and contributed to economic recession. Between 1991 and 1996, manufacturing output declined by 14%, GDP reduced by 8% in 1992 alone, and real GDP per capita shrank by 5.8%. These examples show how SAPs—promoted under the guise of international development—facilitated the economic domination of African countries while impoverishing their societies. Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Zimbabwe cases underscore the use of transnational institutions as instruments for Western control and highlight the systemic nature of international underdevelopment.

## Conclusion

Arturo Escobar's assertion that the dream of international development has become a nightmare of systemic exploitation, oppression, and impoverishment remains profoundly valid. Global development has failed to deliver equitable and inclusive benefits to all societies. The fundamental problem lies in the lack of equitable and inclusive international development. While capitalism promotes innovation and economic growth, it also fosters structural inequalities by prioritizing profit over people. When globalization promotes these inequalities on a global scale, through transnational capitalism and the control of international institutions, it leads to the dominance of the powerful and the marginalization of vulnerable populations. What was once envisioned as a pathway to global prosperity has primarily become a systemic exploitation and impoverishment mechanism, particularly for less-developed nations. The experiences of Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Zimbabwe demonstrate how SAPs—tools of transnational institutions dominated by Western countries—exemplify the strategic use of globalization to benefit the few at the expense of the many. The three case studies validate Escobar's view that international development has failed in its promise of promoting inclusivity and equity, becoming instead a modern form of economic colonization.

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