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Whither growth? International development, social indicators, and the politics of measurement, 1920s–1970s[†]

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Abstract

Few concepts in the history of twentieth-century history proved as important as economic growth. Scholars such as Charles Maier, Robert Collins, and Timothy Mitchell have analysed how the notion that an entity called ‘the economy’ (defined by metrics such as Gross National Product, or GNP) could be made to grow came to define economic thought and policy worldwide. Yet there has been far less attention paid to the fact that neither growth nor GNP went without challenge during their emergence and global diffusion. This article focuses on one set of growth critics: those who advocated for ‘social indicators’ in international development policy during the 1960s and 1970s. It advances three overlapping arguments: that advocates for social indicators harkened back to early twentieth-century transnational efforts to make workers’ ‘standard of living’ the primary statistical framework for policy-makers; that, while supporters of social indicators expressed frustration with technocratic governance, their reform efforts nevertheless represented technocratic critiques of modernity; and finally, that one of the major reform efforts, Morris David Morris’s advocacy on behalf of the ‘Physical Quality of Life Index’ (PQLI), as an alternative measure of national wellbeing, ultimately struggled to challenge the GNP growth paradigm, and yet proved influential in spawning subsequent research into new measures and approaches to development.

Keywords: economic growth; international development; measurement of social indicators; transnational history

From 1950 to 1970, international development experts experienced a dramatic mood shift. In the early 1950s, optimism reigned. The United States, Japan, and western Europe recovered from the ravages of the Second World War, and experienced high economic growth rates measured in Gross National Product (GNP).¹ Buoyed by this boom period, specialists in the new field of development economics devised growth theories, which were designed to take lessons from the Western nations’ historical experience, and export them as models for ‘Third World’ countries. They believed that a mixture of expert knowledge, capital, and technology could transform an

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¹Charles S. Maier, ‘The politics of productivity: foundations of American international economic policy after World War II’, *International Organization*, 31, 4 1977, pp. 607–33.

unequal and tumultuous world of poor decolonizing countries, open to Soviet influence, into a thriving, liberal, and capitalist order.²

By 1970, however, the mood had soured. Optimism gave way to frustration, confidence to doubt, certainty to confusion. Despite two decades of rapid GNP growth rates, the wealthy countries no longer seemed to be stellar models for others to follow. Wide-ranging protests over civil rights, women's rights, the Vietnam War, and environmental degradation gripped countries that had appeared so robust just a few years before. Just as confounding, many 'Third World' countries had achieved high GNP growth rates, but also faced high unemployment levels, political repression, and widespread inequality.³

How did development economists try to reckon with these unexpected outcomes? Some suggested that the West needed to embrace a New International Economic Order (NIEO), a proposal advanced by dissident economists and 'Third World' leaders acting through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to rebalance North–South relations, encourage the cartelization of commodities, and regulate multinational corporations to make the global economy more equitable.⁴ Others argued that radical reorganizations were unnecessary because growth would still smooth out inequality over the long term.⁵

A growing number of experts focused instead on a different aspect of the issue: how countries measured and defined success. During the 1960s and 1970s, economic thinkers such as Dudley Seers, John K. Galbraith, Mahbub ul Haq, Hans Singer, and Morris David Morris came to believe that relying on GNP and pursuing national economic growth had blinded policy-makers to inequality, generated environmental devastation, and exacerbated poverty. In Seers's words, they criticized the 'continued addiction to the use of a single aggregative indicator' as a measure of progress.⁶ To these reformers, questioning the virtues of economic metrics invited greater inquiries about whom development benefited, how it was pursued, what developers could do, and, most of all, what development should do and what it should mean. As part of their critiques, many of these experts, who were largely economists and sociologists, advocated for social indicators to supplement GNP, or even replace it. 'Social indicators' was a category that included statistics on income distribution, literacy, and education levels, among many others. A loose, transnational network of heterodox social scientists and civil servants believed that these numbers would help policy-makers to make targeted reforms to reduce inequities of power, opportunity, and wealth within all countries.⁷

This article analyses the rise and evolution of the social indicators movement, making three overlapping arguments. First, the movement derived from criticisms about the unanticipated downsides of rapid economic growth, as measured by GNP and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and yet sought to redress such problems within a technocratic framework.⁸ Interest in social indicators stemmed from a broader discontent with modernity, which pervaded the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s. Although the social indicators movement challenged the economic growth paradigm, it was not radical. It stemmed from a technocratic critique of modernity, which claimed that the root problems of contemporary life could be resolved through the use of socially relevant and more specialized data.

²David Ekbladh, *The great American mission: modernization and the construction of an American world order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Michael E. Latham, *The right kind of revolution: modernization, development, and U.S. foreign policy from the Cold War to the present*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.

³Barbara Ward, J. D. Runnalls, and Lenore D'Anjou, eds., *The widening gap: development in the 1970s*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.

⁴Nils Gilman, 'The new international economic order: a reintroduction', *Humanity*, 6, 1, 2015, pp. 1–16.

⁵Michael Gubser, 'The presentist bias: ahistoricism, equity, and international development in the 1970s', *Journal of Development Studies*, 48, 12, 2012, pp. 1802–5.

⁶Dudley Seers, 'What are we trying to measure?', in Nancy Baster, ed., *Measuring development: the role and adequacy of development indicators*, London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1972, p. 22.

⁷Ian Miles, *Social indicators for human development*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985.

⁸GDP is the value of the production within a country, and GNP is that value plus net property income from abroad.

Second, in calling for social knowledge in development policy, reformers evoked an older statistical tradition, when a wide diversity of approaches to measurement and policy-making flourished. In particular, the social indicators movement of the 1960s and 1970s reflected an early twentieth-century research effort to make a quantifiable ‘standard of living’ for workers central to policy-making.⁹ The ‘standard of living’ concept gained transnational support during the 1920s and 1930s, before the widespread use of economic aggregates in national and international policy-making. Over the 1940s and 1950s, GNP narrowed how economists and policy-makers represented living standards. However, the social indicators movement of the 1960s and 1970s revived the standard of living reformers’ emphasis on multi-faceted individual-level analysis, community reform, distributional concerns, and the need for state interventions to reduce poverty. In both of these eras, social scientists and reformers who embraced social indicators saw sub-national measures as the most useful and just way to assess public policy.

Finally, the social indicators movement inspired alternative metrics to supplement GNP in international development institutions, but it had a more limited influence in altering the growth paradigm. Among many new metrics put forward, the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) garnered academic interest and institutional backing in the 1970s. The PQLI marked an important evolution in development thought, operating alongside GNP as a counterpoint and critique that inspired experts to rethink the place of economic growth in policy-making. It also provided a blueprint for alternative development approaches, such as the small-scale development of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as metrics such as the Human Development Index.¹⁰ Yet advocates for the PQLI and similar metrics sought to revive faith in expert governance and pursue social reform without challenging larger inequalities between countries. By the late 1970s, although social indicators had won widespread support among development experts, many ‘Third World’ governments rejected them, because the statistics did not capture persistent inequalities in the global economy. Moreover, they feared that wealthy countries would use the new metrics to reduce foreign aid commitments for large-scale, industrial development projects. As a result, social indicators made little headway in the countries that reformers sought to help the most.

For the historian, the debates over the meaning and measurement of development during the 1960s and 1970s suggest that the economic growth paradigm has not been as stable or omnipotent as many accounts suggest. Scholars have uncovered how and why the concept of national economic growth became so central to twentieth-century global history. Political theorists and historians have explained the intellectual and political origins of ‘the national economy’ as a policy-making object, and how GNP became the dominant measurement of it.¹¹ Related research by historians such as Matthias Schmelzer has shown that economic growth became a powerful policy-making paradigm worldwide, and, in the words of John McNeill, ‘easily the most important idea of the

⁹Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible empire: America’s advance through twentieth-century Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 75–129; Judith G. Coffin, ‘A “standard” of living? European perspectives on class and consumption in the early twentieth century’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 55, 1999, pp. 6–26; Patricia Clavin, *Securing the world economy: the reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 164–79; Lawrence Glickman, ‘Inventing the “American standard of living”: gender, race, and working-class identity, 1880–1925’, *Labor History*, 34, 2, 1993, pp. 221–35.

¹⁰Elizabeth A. Stanton, ‘Human Development Index: a history’, Working Paper No. 127, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2007, https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=peri_workingpapers (consulted 19 March 2019).

¹¹Timothy Mitchell, ‘Economic growth: how the future entered government’, *Critical Inquiry*, 40, 2014, pp. 479–507; Adam Tooze, *Statistics and the German state, 1900–1945: the making of modern economic knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Manu Goswami, *Producing India: from colonial economy to national space*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Daniel Speich Chassé, ‘The use of global abstractions: national income accounting in the period of imperial decline’, *Journal of Global History*, 6, 1, 2011, pp. 7–28; Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: decolonization, economic development, and state formation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

twentieth century'.¹² Telling the story of GNP has become a particularly popular endeavour. A series of books published during the last decade by scholars and journalists present similar narratives, depicting GNP as a 'great invention' that came to 'rule the world'.¹³ While these recent studies all note contemporary criticisms of GNP, they often overlook the long history of reformers positing alternative ways to measure and value the social world, such as those advocating for social indicators during the 1960s and 1970s, or for standard of living statistics during the early twentieth century. This article thus shifts focus away from the oft-told origins of GNP and the rise of the growth paradigm to the critics, who challenged dominant ways of measuring and assessing development.

By examining the social indicators advocates' criticisms of economic growth as a policy-making goal, this article builds on recent research exploring the contestation over major concepts in twentieth-century history. As this *Journal* detailed in its 2011 special issue, for instance, contemporary debates about global inequality stem from a longer history of political, economic, and scientific discourses about the various approaches to development and modernization.¹⁴ Rob Konkel demonstrated in another recent issue that, within the World Bank, the definition of poverty and the statistics used to quantify it evolved over time as a result of political conflicts within the organization.¹⁵ Moreover, Morten Jerven exposed the myriad flaws and limitations of postcolonial African statistics that policy-makers and scholars too often uncritically embraced in their assessments of African growth.¹⁶ In these cases, historians have uncovered the diverse and often conflictual meanings attached to concepts such as development. They have also revealed that even collecting data to assess progress has been rife with political discord and technical challenges.

This article expands on such research by recovering alternative traditions of intellectuals and reformers debating *what* to measure to define national and international development. After all, the standard of living measures and social indicators were just two of many different sets of numbers that were used to define social goals and political priorities over the last century and a half. Many other reformers – from environmental critics, seeking to price nature, to social psychologists, who sought measures of 'happiness' – similarly challenged the intellectual and political hegemony of growth, and proposed new metrics.¹⁷ Though scarcely studied, these alternatives

¹²Matthias Schmelzer, *The hegemony of growth: the making and remaking of the economic growth paradigm and the OECD, 1948 to 2010*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016; J. R. McNeill, *Something new under the sun: an environmental history of the twentieth-century world*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000, p. 336. See also Robert Collins, *More: the politics of economic growth in postwar America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Scott O'Bryan, *The growth idea: purpose and prosperity in postwar Japan*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009; Andrew L. Yarrow, *Measuring America: how economic growth came to define American greatness in the late twentieth century*, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

¹³Ehsan Masood, *The great invention: the story of GDP and the making (and unmaking) of the modern world*, New York: Pegasus Books, 2016; Dirk Philipsen, *The little big number: how GDP came to rule the world and what to do about it*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015; Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean Paul Fitoussi, *Mismeasuring our lives: why GDP doesn't add up*, New York: The New Press, 2010; Lorenzo Fioramonti, *Gross domestic problem: the politics behind the world's most powerful number*, London: Zed Books, 2013; Zachary Karabell, *The leading indicators: a short history of the numbers that rule our world*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014; Diane Coyle, *GDP: a brief but affectionate history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014; Phillip Lepenies, *The power of a single number: a political history of GDP*, trans. Jeremy Gaines, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016; David Pilling, *The growth delusion: wealth, poverty, and the well-being of nations*, New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

¹⁴*Journal of Global History*, 6, 1, 2011. See also Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking small: the United States and the lure of community development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, for varieties of development approaches.

¹⁵Rob Konkel, 'The monetization of global poverty: the concept of poverty in World Bank history, 1944–90', *Journal of Global History*, 9, 2, 2014, pp. 276–300.

¹⁶Morten Jerven, 'An unlevel playing field: national income estimates and reciprocal comparison in global economic history', *Journal of Global History*, 7, 1, 2012, pp. 107–28; Morten Jerven, *Poor numbers: how we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013.

¹⁷Stephen Macekura, 'Development and economic growth: an intellectual history', in Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer, eds., *History of the future of economic growth: historical roots of current debates on sustainable degrowth*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 120–8.

warrant further attention. Debates among social scientists over how to measure development reflected larger questions about how policy-makers used statistics to narrate stories of national purpose, what leaders prioritized in policy, and how reformers challenged the often-misplaced faith in economic growth as a panacea for political and social ills. The social indicators movement in particular illuminates how historical actors recognized the flaws of technocratic high modernism and the importance of local knowledge, the two pillars of James C. Scott's study of modern state power, but struggled to reconcile the two in practice through new metrics such as the PQLI.¹⁸ By investigating how experts pursued social reform through new techniques to measure and assess international development initiatives, this article highlights significant debates over national governance and international power across the twentieth-century world.

From the 'standard of living' to 'economic growth'

Efforts to quantify national economic activity reach back hundreds of years, but they were largely inchoate until the late nineteenth century. Historians often trace attempts to measure national wealth to the 1640s, when the English doctor William Petty counted land in Ireland that the English state could tax. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, governments tabulated population, trade, industry, and agricultural statistics. By the late nineteenth century, political economists and statisticians in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom were experimenting with rudimentary calculations of the 'national income' of their respective states, a term used to describe the annual flow of material goods and capital through a country's borders.¹⁹ Governments increasingly relied on priced statistics of productivity and investment to make policies based on the effects that shifts in labour and consumption would have on capital accumulation and market activity.²⁰

As economic statistics grew in popularity from the middle of the nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, reformers began to collect social statistics as a tool to manage and improve life in industrial society. The Industrial Revolution and recurrent boom–bust economic cycles of the mid to late nineteenth century spawned myriad political and social crises in the United States and Europe. Social scientific reformers collected data on the social and economic aspects of everyday life for workers. Among the earliest efforts were those of the French engineer and statistician Frédéric Le Play, who mixed direct participant observation with detailed quantitative studies of family budgets across the whole of Europe in his 1855 monograph, *Les ouvriers européens*. He saw such social research as a tool to 'furnish statesmen with a solid basis for resolving social questions'.²¹ In the United States, the incipient labour movement used family budget surveys to illuminate the poor living conditions of industrial workers, and widespread inequality.²² Labour leaders backed these efforts as a crucial empirical basis to make distributional claims on behalf of a minimum 'living' or 'fair' wage.²³ By the end of the nineteenth century, social reformers quantified many aspects of everyday life, such as unemployment levels, suicides, crime rates,

¹⁸James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

¹⁹Paul Studenski, *The income of nations: theory, measurement, and analysis: past and present*, New York: New York University Press, 1958, pp. 26–141.

²⁰Eli Cook, *The pricing of progress: economic indicators and the capitalization of American life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

²¹Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, 'The social survey in historical perspective', in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *The social survey in historical perspective, 1880–1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 15.

²²John Modell, 'Patterns of consumption, acculturation, and family income strategies in late nineteenth-century America', in Tamara K. Hareven and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds., *Family and population in nineteenth-century America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 207.

²³Thomas A. Stapleford, 'Defining a 'living wage' in America: transformations in union wage theories, 1870–1930', *Labor History*, 49, 1, 2008, pp. 1–22.

literacy rates, and cost-of-living changes, to track the effects of corporate practice and government policy on workers' lives.²⁴

This desire to measure and define social life found its most ambitious expression in a transatlantic movement to quantify the notion of a 'standard of living' for the 'average' worker. The notion that experts could divine a widely comparable set of living standards emerged as the United States and European countries grappled with the disruptive and transformational effects of rapid industrialization, migration, and mass consumption. Yet there was little consensus on a definition for a standard of living. Victoria de Grazia notes that Americans held a much more consumerist definition of the standard of living than their European counterparts, who stressed the hard-to-define qualities of a good life over counting prices of consumer goods and purchasing behaviour.²⁵

Nevertheless, American and European social scientists linked the phrase with a set of numbers that policy-makers could employ to compare classes of workers within a country, or across borders. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) carried out studies of workers' standard of living in most European countries, the United States, Japan, China, India, and much of South America from the late 1920s to 1939.²⁶ The desire to measure workers' daily lives placed 'notions of the standard of living at almost the center of current economic thinking' in the 1920s, according to the American economist Leo Wolman.²⁷ This research epitomized the social reformist impulse behind statistically informed policy-making.

To render social data comparable across different contexts, the ILO and the League of Nations sought to standardize how to define and collect standard of living statistics. In the early 1920s, for instance, the ILO paired with the Ford Motor Company in a project that exposed many difficulties in comparing wellbeing between labourers in Detroit and European cities, prompting questions over whether Henry Ford's workers should be held up as a standard for labourers everywhere.²⁸ In the 1930s, the League of Nations expanded on this research, culminating in the League's Sub-Committee on Standard of Living of 1938, under the direction of the Australian diplomat Frank MacDougall and the British economist Noel Hall.²⁹

The League's efforts, as with the collection of social statistics in general, reflected a deep faith that such information could redress class conflict, poverty, and social strife through empirically based social policies. According to Hall, in a world where leaders had become so preoccupied with 'internal stability' amid the global depression and the rising influence of fascism and communism, the capitalist world needed better social information to improve overall welfare.³⁰ The ILO director, Albert Thomas, claimed that standard of living statistics 'held the key to employment and international peace', by allowing heads of states to direct their energy and finances to redressing the conditions of the neediest groups, more evenly distributing wealth, and strengthening the very

²⁴Thomas A. Stapleford, *The cost of living in America: a political history of economic statistics, 1880–2000*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Alice O'Connor, *Poverty knowledge: social science, social policy, and the poor in twentieth-century U.S. history*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001; Theodore M. Porter, *The rise of statistical thinking, 1820–1920*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

²⁵De Grazia, *Irresistible empire*, pp. 76–7.

²⁶International Labour Organisation Archives, Geneva, Switzerland (henceforth ILOA), Series T, file no. 101/1/13/1, 'Summary of an official enquiry on working and living conditions and on the situation of industry in China'; ILOA, Series T, file no. 102/0, 'Labour statistics'.

²⁷Leo Wolman, 'Consumption and the standard of living', in Committee on Recent Economic Changes of the President's Conference on Unemployment, *Recent economic changes in the United States, volumes 1 and 2*, New York: McGraw-Hill for the National Bureau of Economic Research, 1929, p. 13.

²⁸ILOA, Series T, file no. 101/0/1/0, 'Notes of a meeting held at the International Labour Office, September 9th, 1929'; ILOA, Series T, file no. 101/0/1, 'Discussion with Mr. Filene at Amsterdam, July 10–12, 1929'; De Grazia, *Irresistible empire*, pp. 79–81.

²⁹Clavin, *Securing the world economy*, p. 174.

³⁰League of Nations Archives, Geneva, Switzerland, Cotes des Series 1227, Cotes des Cartons 2694, folder 'Enquete sur le niveau de vie', Noel Hall, 'Preliminary investigation into measures of a national or international character for raising the standard of living', 21 May 1938.

nature of liberal capitalism in a world of threatening alternatives.³¹ In this line of thinking, the construction of comparable statistics for different social groups and occupations served not only business interests and academic research but also government policy-makers.

Colonial powers similarly imbued such statistics with great significance, as officials sought data to measure the standard of living in their imperial holdings. In the Dutch East Indies, researchers collected a wide range of statistics, from public health spending, to housing construction, to drug use, in order to compare the gap between colonial Dutch and native peoples' living standards.³² In colonial Africa, British authorities recognized that low indigenous living standards, based on a range of colonial surveys and statistical missions from the 1930s to gather information on how subject populations lived, threatened the future legitimacy of colonialism itself. When African workers engaged in a series of strikes during the early years of the Second World War, colonial experts searched for ways to improve workers' standard of living, to ensure that colonial policy would 'appear' progressive but still avoid precipitating self-government. All the while, the outpouring of social data reinforced to Africans the vast gulf between their status and material circumstances, and those of the ruling class.³³

Amid this transnational interest in calculating standards of living, economists also made a series of innovations to depict a more abstract entity: 'the national economy'. Statistical advances by the US economist Simon Kuznets and the British economist Colin Clark led to income estimates for their respective countries, which policy-makers used to manage the Great Depression by viewing a national economy as a whole. During the Second World War, aggregate economic metrics became critical to managing domestic economies for wartime mobilization. By the war's end, economists and policy-makers relied on a new statistic, GNP, which aggregated a country's total annual production of all goods and services. GNP offered policy-makers a way to calculate how much a government could spend, and how much it could increase taxes, to achieve its military procurement goals, as well as a clear way to present that information to the public. In the post-war years, such aggregate economic statistics became central to national governance.³⁴

Standard of living statistics and GNP held promise for policy-makers because they made aspects of the social world legible in concise numerical terms. But the two types of numbers implied different policy priorities and choices for national leaders. Whereas standard of living statistics provided individualized details about how workers lived, national income accounting offered a snapshot of the economy as an integrated whole. Standard of living advocates emphasized distribution through targeted social interventions, to improve the material wellbeing of disempowered social groups. In contrast, GNP directed attention to the entire economy, so policy-makers sought to make that abstraction grow or shrink, under the belief that doing so would necessarily benefit all. Standard of living statistics were sub-national, whereas GNP was delimited by the nation-state. As GNP became increasingly popular in policy circles and popular discourses, it did not replace standard of living concepts altogether. But it enabled greater focus on 'the national economy' as a more generalized policy-making object.

By the end of the 1930s, policy-makers linked standard of living research and national income statistics by suggesting that GNP growth would raise standards of living, through an autogenic trickle-down process. The League of Nations' work on standards of living revealed as much. Noel Hall's 1938 report on the work of the League's Sub-Committee on Standard of Living argued that the main emphasis for governments worldwide 'should be focussed upon a single objective, the raising of the several national standards of living'. Hall stressed the improvement of workers'

³¹Clavin, *Securing the world economy*, p. 173.

³²Amry Vandenbosch, *The Dutch East Indies: its government, problems, and politics*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1941.

³³Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African society: the labor question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 111.

³⁴Timothy Mitchell, 'Economicity'; Macekura, 'Development and economic growth', pp. 114–16.

consumption habits through a 'redistribution of productive resources', but also the need for 'well-designed policies to stimulate production, particularly if they are international in character'.³⁵

In 1945, the League of Nations' final report on economic matters placed even greater emphasis on aggregate production. Countries rich and poor needed to substitute 'positive for negative aims – not the relief of unemployment when it develops, but the attainment of high and stable levels of output and employment in keeping with the capacity of industry and agriculture; not the protection of particular interests against foreign competition, but the encouragement of general expansion'. The report noted that 'policy must be concerned not only with the size of the national income, but also with its distribution', though the focus aimed squarely at 'expansion' of national income to achieve it.³⁶

Similar thinking appeared in colonial policy too. Frederick Cooper shows that British colonial officials often proclaimed that increasing the 'productive capacity' of the colonies would serve to raise standards of living for Africans in a trickle-down process, using the promise of future gains from increased production to tamp down distributional demands, without introducing redistributive policies or disrupting wartime output.³⁷ The assistant under-secretary of state for the Colonial Office Gerard Clauson made this point clear in a 1942 paper. To 'raise the general standard of living' in the colonies, the UK needed to 'increase the aggregate consumption of mankind'. Since the 'aggregate consumption of mankind is roughly but not exactly equal to the aggregate output', he argued that increasing production should be the policy priority.³⁸ Discussions of standard of living statistics, so rich during the 1920s and 1930s, narrowed, as economists increasingly argued for growing aggregate income as the best way to lift standards of living. By this time, many economists had adopted GNP per capita as a shorthand for measuring the standard of living.³⁹

The widespread use of GNP made possible the concept of national economic growth. The growth concept gained cultural power and political significance because it allowed policy-makers to redress both high poverty and distributional conflicts through a superficially neutral language of technocratic consensus.⁴⁰ Growth became a powerful mantra in the post-war United States, western Europe, and Japan.⁴¹ The Cold War further reinforced and amplified the centrality of economic growth for nation-states everywhere. Policy-makers in the United States and Europe expanded earlier efforts to 'develop' Latin America, Asia, Africa, and southern Europe, through foreign aid designed to spark growth. They carefully measured and tracked changes with new national income and product statistics, in the hope of winning hearts and minds.⁴² The Soviet Union also promised material transformation through rapid growth, which was measured as Net Material Product, the socialist version of GNP. Planned industrialization represented an alternative path to modernity, which promised widespread prosperity without the imperial legacy of the United States and Europe. After Josef Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet leaders ramped up their foreign aid commitments to help communist methods of growth compete with capitalist ones.⁴³ The Cold War was a geopolitical conflict, but it was also a competition over which ideological system could generate growth across the world.

³⁵N. F. Hall, *Preliminary investigation into measures of a national or international character for raising the standard of living*, Geneva: League of Nations, 1938, pp. 10, 16, 26.

³⁶*Economic stability in the post-war world, part II: the conditions of prosperity after the transition from war to peace*, Geneva: League of Nations, 1945, pp. 20–2.

³⁷Cooper, *Decolonization and African society*, pp. 114–24.

³⁸The National Archives, Kew, UK, CO 852/503/17, 'The problem of raising the standard of living in the British colonial empire', 1942, p. 7.

³⁹ILOA, Series T, file no. 200/01, 'Notes concerning report on measures to improve standards of living'.

⁴⁰Charles Maier, *In search of stability: explorations of historical political economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 146; Schmelzer, *Hegemony of growth*, pp. 75–162.

⁴¹Collins, *More*; Alan S. Milward, *The European rescue of the nation-state*, London: Routledge, 2000; O'Bryan, *Growth idea*.

⁴²Stephen Macekura, 'The point four program and international development policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, 128, 1, 2013, pp. 127–60; Speich Chassé, 'Use of global abstractions', pp. 22–6.

⁴³Latham, *Right kind of revolution*, pp. 41–2; Alessandro Iandolo, 'The rise and fall of the Soviet model of development in West Africa, 1957–1964', *Cold War History*, 12, 4, 2012, pp. 683–704.

In the era of decolonization, nationalist leaders also spoke the language of growth, and adopted GNP as the measure of success. In India, Prasanta Mahalanobis, an eminent statistician and the head of the country's powerful planning commission, adopted GNP as the metric for his five-year plans. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first post-independence prime minister, embraced GNP growth as the 'means to build a modern nation'.⁴⁴ In Kenya, Tom Mboya, the country's minister of justice and a leading figure in its development efforts, argued that the first objective of Kenya's planning was to 'attain higher growth rates of our national income and, therefore, achieve higher living standards for all people'.⁴⁵ In postcolonial Sudan, 'the rate of economic growth became the measure of a successful government'.⁴⁶

Low or insufficient growth could imperil those whose legitimacy rested on major economic transformation. In Indonesia, Sukarno's revolutionary postcolonial government struggled with this problem, and ultimately lost power, as the country experienced high inflation and low production by the mid 1960s. Subsequently, General Suharto staked his New Order regime's legitimacy on its capacity to improve the situation through a 'commitment to modernization and the promise of stability and rapid economic growth'.⁴⁷ Achieving high economic growth rates was a powerful 'act of sovereignty' that promised material transformations to redress past exploitation and shaped the economic imaginaries of many revolutionary nationalist and postcolonial leaders.⁴⁸

To engineer high growth, in the 1950s and 1960s policy-makers turned to economists. Scholars such as Walt Rostow applied their growth theories to the foreign aid policies of the United States.⁴⁹ Others advised new national governments directly, such as Arthur Lewis's work for Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.⁵⁰ Hans Singer recalled that GNP 'enabled economists to transfer familiar concepts and familiar modes of thinking to the relatively new but rapidly emerging problems of the Third World', assuming that a 'trickle-down' effect would reach everyone.⁵¹ By 1960, GNP growth had become 'the premier goal of social policy throughout the world'.⁵² In this context, economists garnered legitimacy and authority as the key experts to analyse, model, and replicate national economic growth globally.

Critiques of GNP growth and the rise of social indicators

Although economic growth had become a central policy goal across the world by the late 1950s, critics of economic growth and the reliance on aggregate economic metrics increasingly voiced their concerns. Popular intellectuals and writers, such as John Kenneth Galbraith, David Reisman, and Vance Packard, lamented the social downsides of rapid growth, including rampant

⁴⁴David Engerman, 'Bernath lecture: American knowledge and global power', *Diplomatic History*, 31, 4, 2007, p. 619.

⁴⁵Tom Mboya, 'African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya', in *The challenge of nationhood: a collection of speeches and writings by Tom Mboya*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, p. 103.

⁴⁶Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: decolonization, economic development, and state formation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 16.

⁴⁷Brad Simpson, 'Indonesia's "accelerated modernization" and the global discourse of development', *Diplomatic History*, 33, 3, 2009, p. 477.

⁴⁸Daniel Speich, 'Travelling with the GDP through early development economics' history', Working papers on the nature of evidence: how well do facts travel? no. 33/2008, London School of Economics, Department of Economic History, 2008, p. 32, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/22501/> (consulted 19 March 2019).

⁴⁹Latham, *Right kind of revolution*, pp. 44–58.

⁵⁰Robert L. Tignor, *W. Arthur Lewis and the birth of development economics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 144–78.

⁵¹H. W. Singer, 'Poverty, income distribution, and levels of living: thirty years of changing thoughts on development problems', in C. H. Hanumantha Rao and P. C. Joshi, eds., *Reflection on economic development and social change: essays in honour of Professor V.K.R.V. Rao*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Ltd., 1979, p. 31.

⁵²Moses Abramovitz, *Thinking about growth and other essays on economic growth and welfare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 328.

consumerism, increasing waste, and social alienation.⁵³ The Marxist economist Paul Baran criticized the United States for undermining or overthrowing governments that adopted nationalistic approaches to growth, and thus narrowed economic possibilities for the ‘Third World’.⁵⁴ Scholars such as Ezra Mishan and Kenneth Boulding identified the myriad ‘costs of economic growth’, which ranged from traffic congestion, to toxic pollution, to spiritual despair, and they pondered growth’s limits.⁵⁵ Colin Clark and Simon Kuznets, two key progenitors of GNP and national income accounting, both came to lament the narrow focus on economic growth over social wellbeing.⁵⁶ By the mid 1960s, environmentalists in the United States and western Europe were forcefully critiquing rapid growth as the cause of ecological catastrophes, and instead sought to pursue a high ‘quality of life’, in what became one of the most prominent attacks on the growth paradigm.⁵⁷ Such criticisms resonated with a growing disillusionment with modernity defined by technocracy and industrialization, as expressed by scholars such as Jacques Ellul and Herbert Marcuse.⁵⁸ Just as economic growth emerged as a powerful concept for policy-makers seeking to resolve old distributional conflicts, for its critics the pursuit of growth stood in as a catch-all for the ills of modern societies and the misguided values of their elites.

As such criticisms of growth in wealthy countries intensified in the 1960s, international development experts questioned the preoccupation with GNP growth in ‘Third World’ countries, too. Foremost among these were Dudley Seers and Hans Singer. Seers had studied economics at the University of Cambridge, and he worked in various UN organizations and UK government agencies during the 1940s and 1950s. By the late 1960s, he shared many of the emerging critiques of economic growth that were current in wealthy countries. He also pondered the validity of economic growth in international development policies, and the suitability of GNP for the ‘Third World’.⁵⁹ Seers argued that focusing on GNP growth led to centralized and excessive planning, so much so that ‘typical fast growth policies seem both to require and to induce oppression’.⁶⁰ High growth rates concealed persistent poverty, which led to pervasive physiological ills (such as protein deficiencies in children) and vast social problems (such as limited access to education). ‘The noses of the social scientist and the statistician should be rubbed into such social realities during the decades that lie ahead’, Seers claimed in 1969.⁶¹

Hans Singer agreed. He too had studied at Cambridge, as one of John Maynard Keynes’s first PhD students, and he later worked for the UN, where he produced a series of influential articles on growth, employment, and trade theory.⁶² By the early 1960s, Singer came to echo Seers’s criticisms,

⁵³John Kenneth Galbraith, *The affluent society*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1958; Vance O. Packard, *The waste makers*, London: Longmans, 1960; David Riesman, *Abundance for what and other essays*, London: Chatto, 1964.

⁵⁴Paul Baran, *The political economy of growth*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1957.

⁵⁵Ezra J. Mishan, *The costs of economic growth*, New York: Staples Press, 1967; Kenneth E. Boulding, ‘The economics of the coming spaceship earth’, in H. Jarrett, ed., *Environmental quality in a growing economy*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966, pp. 3–14.

⁵⁶Colin Clark, *Growthmanship: a study in the mythology of investment*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1961; Simon Kuznets, ‘Economic growth and income inequality’, *American Economic Review*, 45, 1, 1955, pp. 1–28; Simon Kuznets, ‘How to judge quality’, *New Republic*, 20 October 1962, pp. 29–31.

⁵⁷Stephen Macekura, *Of limits and growth: the rise of global sustainable development in the twentieth century*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 91–104; Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, health, and permanence: environmental politics in the United States, 1955–1985*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁵⁸Jacques Ellul, *The technological society*, trans. John Wilkinson, New York: Vintage Books, 1964; Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964;

⁵⁹Dudley Seers, ‘The role of national income estimates in the statistical policy of an underdeveloped area’, *Review of Economic Studies*, 20, 3, 1952–3, pp. 159–68; Dudley Seers, ‘The limitations of the special case’, *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Statistics*, 25, 2, 1963, p. 80.

⁶⁰Dudley Seers Papers, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK (henceforth Seers papers), box 8, Dudley Seers, ‘The changing definition and measurement of development’, 26 June 1978.

⁶¹Seers papers, box 22, Dudley Seers, ‘The meaning of development’, *Institute for Development Studies Communication*, 4, 1969, p. 9.

⁶²Singer, ‘Poverty’, p. 31.

and he called for non-economic knowledge to help development experts refocus their attention on social issues. He argued that, in the mid 1960s, ‘The development economist, as he began to turn away from his textbooks and learned about underdeveloped countries, was driven back towards the earlier position, viz., that those queer fish and lesser breeds – sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, etc. – had after all a lot to contribute to the problems of economic development.’⁶³ Seers and Singer were economists who had once embraced the growth paradigm, but who turned against it to promote development approaches that directly targeted poverty and inequality.

Criticisms of growth and GNP also resonated among international development experts, because of changes in foreign aid policies and international politics. Upon taking office in 1969, the US President Richard Nixon redirected foreign aid away from large-scale government-led projects towards promoting flows of private investment, to cut costs for the United States, and to curtail Cold War tensions. With the Soviet leadership open to pursuing détente with the United States, the strategic competition between the superpowers waned.⁶⁴ In addition, by the late 1960s there were hundreds of thousands of development practitioners who had travelled across the world, and who had experienced fraught development efforts at first hand. They saw how development projects upset local ecologies and social stability, how donor interests superseded those of recipients, and how synoptic national plans failed to achieve their goals.⁶⁵

New data presented a confounding relationship between growth and poverty. According to the Pearson report, the result of a World Bank initiative to assess the state of international development, the ‘Third World’ had averaged a 4.8% annual GNP growth rate from 1950 to 1967, exceeding the 4.3% rate for the ‘First World’.⁶⁶ Yet subsequent analysis revealed that, despite high growth rates, ‘Third World’ countries also faced high unemployment, political repression, environmental degradation, and social inequality.⁶⁷ For all these reasons, it became politically viable for leaders and policy-makers to rethink their commitment to pursuing economic growth in the ‘Third World’.

In this environment, experts challenged the prevailing development approaches around the world. Scholars from Asia, Africa, and Latin America made a series of important critiques. By the late 1960s UNCTAD and the Economic Commission for Latin America had nurtured research into critical approaches, such as dependency theory, which analysed persistent divergence between wealthy and poor countries.⁶⁸

Inequality within countries became another important point of contention. The Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, for instance, wondered whether national economic growth should remain a top developmental priority, given that it had led to vast domestic income inequality and ‘failed to translate into improvements in the lives of Pakistan’s masses’.⁶⁹ During a powerful speech in Karachi on 24 April 1968, Haq decried the consolidation of wealth in the hands of the country’s twenty-two richest families, and ‘tried to focus national attention on justice in the distribution of wealth in the midst of celebration over a rapid rate of growth’.⁷⁰ In addition, feminist economists exposed the absence of unwaged women’s work from national accounting systems, and emphasized the often-overlooked role of women in development theory and practice.⁷¹

⁶³H.W. Singer, ‘The notion of human investment’, *Review of Social Economy*, 24, 1, 1966, p. 4.

⁶⁴Ekbladh, *Great American mission*, pp. 220–2 Macekura, *Of limits and growth*, pp. 150–3.

⁶⁵Edgar Owens and Robert Shaw, *Development reconsidered: bridging the gap between government and people*, Washington, DC: Heath, 1972.

⁶⁶Lester B. Pearson, *Partners in development: report of the Commission on International Development*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969, p. 358.

⁶⁷Ward, Runnalls, and D’Anjou, *Widening gap*.

⁶⁸Ekbladh, *Great American mission*, pp. 246–8.

⁶⁹M. S. Jillani and Masooda Bano, ‘From “growth” to “growth with a social conscience”’: Haq as an economic planner in Pakistan’, in Khadija Haq and Richard Ponzio, eds., *Pioneering the human development revolution: an intellectual biography of Mahbub ul Haq*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 23.

⁷⁰Mahbub ul Haq, ‘System is to blame for the 22 wealthy families’, *The Times* (London), 22 March 1973.

⁷¹Ester Boserup, *Woman’s role in economic development*, London: George, Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970; Marilyn Waring, *If women counted: a new feminist economics*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

In this context, major development institutions began to embrace reform. The World Bank shifted its lending policy away from large-scale national plans towards more rural and small-scale projects.⁷² In the United States, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations created the Overseas Development Council (ODC) to respond to the many criticisms of US foreign aid efforts. James P. Grant, the ODC's founding president, used the organization to highlight the problems of mainstream growth-oriented development. He put the matter bluntly in a 1973 article for the popular *Foreign Policy* magazine: 'the unparalleled economic growth rates achieved by most developed countries during the 1960's had little or no effect on most of the world's people, who continue to live in desperate poverty'.⁷³ Development economists' optimism about the possibilities of rapid growth in the 1950s had faded by the late 1960s.

Many experts began to reformulate the purpose of international development away from national economic growth towards redistribution, employment, and direct poverty reduction. Dudley Seers and Hans Singer took leading roles in this effort, through their leadership of the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, where they oversaw dozens of reports and conferences about new development approaches. Singer also worked part-time with the ILO, for whom he embarked on a 1971 mission to Kenya to study the country's chronic unemployment problems.⁷⁴ The mission's report on Kenya touted a new paradigm for development, dubbed 'redistribution with growth'.⁷⁵ Kenya's minister of finance and planning, Mwai Kibaki, explained that

in Kenya, there have been assumptions in our planning process to the effect that if we planned for economic growth, very rapid economic growth, then employment would be generated as part and parcel of it . . . [W]hat is now proposed is that it is not enough to plan for growth in national income, it is not enough to plan for growth in production. One has to regard employment as being one of the central objectives.

By emphasizing employment, governments would begin to think more about the distribution of wealth within a society, not just aggregate income. Kibaki claimed that this focus on redistribution was a 'welcome social objective'.⁷⁶

Similarly, other reformers homed in on the root elements of poverty, or what experts at the time called 'basic human needs'. Advocates for this approach, such as Mahbub ul Haq and the British economist and co-founder of the IDS, Paul Streeten, argued that development policies needed to satisfy basic needs, such as adequate shelter and good health care. They should seek to eradicate poverty through targeted, localized projects, rather than through the major nationally oriented interventions geared at generating growth.⁷⁷

These new goals for development not only challenged and revised the growth paradigm, but also required new metrics. During the 1960s and 1970s, growth critics rallied around a burgeoning movement for social indicators to supplant the widespread reliance on economic aggregates and to

⁷²Patrick Allan Sharma, *Robert McNamara's other war: the World Bank and international development*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

⁷³James P. Grant, 'The end of trickle down?', *Foreign Policy*, 12, 1973, p. 43.

⁷⁴*Employment, incomes, and equality: a strategy for increasing productive employment in Kenya*, Geneva: International Labour Office, 1972.

⁷⁵Hollis Chenery, Montek S. Ahluwalia, C. L. G. Bell, John H. Duloy, and Richard Jolly, eds., *Redistribution with growth*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

⁷⁶ILOA, WEP file no. 159-227-3-1, Jacket 3, Abbas Ammar to Robert S. McNamara, 12 December 1973; World Bank Group Archives Oral Histories, 'Transcript of oral history interview with Hollis B. Chenery held on 27 January 1983: main transcript', <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/174871468331197663/pdf/789630v20TRN0C0iew0January027001983.pdf> (consulted 19 March 2019).

⁷⁷Paul Streeten et al., *First things first: meeting basic human needs in the developing countries*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

help guide policy-makers towards the new objectives for development policy. In 1964, a grant from the Dutch government funded the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) to study 'social factors' in economic growth.⁷⁸ In 1966, the American sociologist Raymond Bauer, in an influential study on the domestic social impact of the space race and the militarization of the Cold War, called for social indicators to supplement economic ones.⁷⁹ The following year, the US Senator Walter Mondale sponsored a bill to adopt national social indicators alongside economic ones and to create a 'Council of Social Advisers' to provide advice similar to the Council of Economic Advisers in the United States, amid urban rioting and growing student protest.⁸⁰ In 1970, the UN Statistical Commission noted that 'national statistical offices are under great pressure to develop social statistics which relate directly and immediately to social concerns of the general public and political authorities', and sought to increase the collection and promote further standardization of social data.⁸¹ Even statisticians from some growth-oriented governments in the Global South desired social statistics. Writing in 1975, a member of India's Planning Commission noted the 'much greater degree of awareness about problems connected with inequality in income or in the distribution of public expenditure' in the 'Third World' and endorsed the creation of a system of social and demographic indicators.⁸²

For the many experts who had grown wary of the growth paradigm, social indicators offered a better way to measure developmental change, and thus tell its story. The development economists Paul Streeten and Norman Hicks celebrated social indicators because they reflected concerns 'with ends as well as means, or at least with intermediate ends nearer to the ultimate end of a full and healthy life', and because such numbers were 'capable of catching something of the human, social, and cultural costs of opulence . . . as well as poverty'.⁸³ Social indicators would help policy-makers identify social priorities and make targeted policy interventions to improve their population's well-being, just as experts in the League of Nations and the ILO had hoped for standard of living statistics.

The similarities between the revived focus on distribution and basic needs and the earlier work on standards of living were not lost on contemporary observers. The American researchers Robert Parke and David Seidman wrote in 1978 that the 'concerns of the social indicators movement' were 'not new' and reflected the social research initiatives of the early twentieth century.⁸⁴ In a 1981 article, the development economist Douglas Rimmer compared standard of living research conducted by the League of Nations and the ILO during the 1920s and 1930s with the concern with social wellbeing during the 1970s. The turn towards basic human needs and the search for indicators 'instead of the abstract monetary aggregates' such as GNP amounted to a 'counterrevolution' in development policy. Reformers in the 1970s, he claimed, wanted to challenge 'the sovereignty of economic growth in the thinking of development economists' and to revive the focus on 'minimal living standards' as in the earlier era. For Rimmer, an ardent critic of redistributive policies, the new approaches portended

⁷⁸United Nations Office at Geneva Registry Collection, Geneva, Switzerland (henceforth UNOGRG), GX 10/2/2/77, box 1946, folder 'United Nations Research Institute for Social Development', 'First progress report', February 1965; Michael Ward, *Quantifying the world: UN ideas and statistics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 144.

⁷⁹Raymond A. Bauer, ed., *Social indicators*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1966.

⁸⁰Mark Solovey, 'Senator Fred Harris's national social science foundation proposal: reconsidering federal science policy, natural science-social science relations, and American liberalism during the 1960s', *ISIS*, 103, 1, 2012, pp. 77–8.

⁸¹John Richard Nicholas Stone papers, King's College Archive, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK (henceforth Stone papers), envelope 5/7/2, P. J. Loftus to Richard Stone, 14 November 1970; Stone papers, envelope 5/7/4, 'Report of the expert group on welfare-oriented supplements to the national accounts and balances and other measures of levels of living', UN Statistical Office, 15 April 1976.

⁸²Stone papers, envelope 5/7/4, S. Chakravarty, 'Guidelines for SSDS for developing countries', 15 February 1975.

⁸³Norman Hicks and Paul Streeten, 'Indicators of development: the search for a basic needs yardstick', *World Development*, 7, 1979, p. 570.

⁸⁴Robert Parke and David Seidman, 'Social indicators and social reporting', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 435, 1978, pp. 2–3.

the ‘collectivization of economic life’, and thus warranted scepticism.⁸⁵ In his view, the connections between standard of living measures, social indicators, and basic needs thinking were all too clear.

The PQLI and the limits of social indicators

Unlike the standard of living researchers, many advocates of social indicators sought to create a single aggregate index of social wellbeing, to aid policy-makers accustomed to relying on the simple single figure of GNP. For instance, UNRISD revived the earlier League of Nations studies on living standards, and published new indicators for ‘levels of living’ (1966), a series of metrics for studying and comparing ‘welfare’ in 1970, and a ‘General Index’ that linked different social indicators into a single number.⁸⁶ The Russell Sage Foundation, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development embarked on similar quests to help simplify the growing range of social statistics into a single figure.⁸⁷

Of all these efforts, one of the most successful in terms of expert interest and financial support came from the ODC. In 1977, the organization tasked Morris David Morris, an economist from the University of Washington with a background in sociology, to construct a social index. Morris responded with the PQLI. The PQLI emerged from the growing emphasis on basic human needs and reducing inequality in international development policy. ‘To the extent that development planners within poor countries and aid dispensers in donor countries now focus more directly on projects that emphasize distribution of benefits,’ Morris wrote, ‘they need not only new planning strategies but also additional measurement systems.’⁸⁸ He designed the PQLI to fill that void. While carrying out his initial work on the index, Morris won support from the US Agency for International Development (AID). In the mid 1970s, AID had shifted its funding to include more ‘basic human needs’ projects, but the organization lacked an effective metric to measure their efforts.⁸⁹ The PQLI fitted well with the mandate. AID gave a grant to Morris, which helped him complete his research and publish the first version of the new index in 1979.

The PQLI rested on a very simple set of numbers. The index was based on infant mortality, life expectancy at age one, and literacy rates. Morris transformed each indicator into an index by comparing the level of the indicator to a fixed range of possible levels, and then taking the average of the three components. He intended the PQLI to serve national governments for making comparisons, but also for sub-national analysis of regional and local results according to gender or income levels. He viewed it as ‘a practical measure of social distribution that will avoid the limitations of the GNP, that will minimize cultural and developmental ethnocentricity, and that will be internationally comparable’.⁹⁰ As with GNP, Morris sought clarity, simplicity, and comparability. In contrast to other economic aggregates, he hoped that the PQLI would give more insight into the social health and wellbeing of a country’s population.

Morris’s index received institutional and professional acclaim from around the world, especially among international development specialists, who saw it as particularly valuable for

⁸⁵Douglas Rimmer, ‘“Basic needs” and the origins of the development ethos’, *Journal of the Developing Areas*, 15, 2, 1981, pp. 215–16, 236–7.

⁸⁶Jan Drenowski, *Studies in the measurement of levels of living and welfare*, Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1970; D. V. McGranahan, C. Richard-Proust, N. V. Sovani, and M. Subramanian, *Contents and measurements of socioeconomic development*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 138; UNOGRG, GX 10/2/2/77, box 1946, folder ‘United Nations Research Institute for Social Development’, ‘Programme of work for 1967–1968’, July 1967.

⁸⁷Eleanor Bernert Sheldon and Wilbert E. Moore, eds., *Indicators of social change: concepts and measurements*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968; S. Jain, *Size distribution of income: a compilation of data*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 1975; *Measuring social well-being: a progress report on the development of social indicators*, Paris: OECD, 1976.

⁸⁸Morris David Morris, *Measuring the world’s poor: the physical quality of life index*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1979, p. 2.

⁸⁹Rolf H. Sartorius and Vernon W. Ruttan, ‘The source of the basic human needs mandate’, *Journal of Developing Areas*, 23, 3, 1989, pp. 332–7.

⁹⁰Morris D. Morris, ‘A physical quality of life index’, *Urban Ecology*, 3, 1978, p. 225.

'Third World' countries. James Grant of the ODC hailed the PQLI because it depicted 'a stereoscopic view – a way of looking behind the façade of the GNP numbers'.⁹¹ Dudley Seers eagerly anticipated the PQLI's arrival, as did many more development experts who saw it as 'vastly more illuminating in some respects than GNP'.⁹² Douglas Rimmer also celebrated Morris's work, because it 'brought out with clarity and force the merits of a simple, demographically based index as a measurement of poverty and material progress alternative to dubious aggregations of economic output'.⁹³ The PQLI showed that a few countries with high growth rates, such as Brazil, appeared far less impressive than their GNP would suggest. A few small countries, notably Sri Lanka, with a history of investing in basic needs, scored far better than growth marvels such as Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, or India. The data on Sri Lanka, according to one observer, told 'a success story, in terms of human welfare, more truly remarkable than the more widely publicized stories of countries which are far wealthier in terms of per capita GNP'.⁹⁴ According to the Indian journalist M. V. Kamath, the PQLI provided 'a fascinating and largely accurate picture of nations as they are, not what their GNP alone would make us believe'.⁹⁵ In the tradition of early standard of living indicators, it gave analysts confidence that they could measure and thus improve material wellbeing of different social groups in a country.

The PQLI was also similar to the standard of living statistics in the way that it pointed to 'quality of life' as the new ultimate purpose for development in place of growth. The phrase 'quality of life' was an umbrella term to redirect policy attention away from narrow economic goals towards how a population lived.⁹⁶ Morris used the phrase to indicate only physical wellbeing – defined as living a long life with the ability to read – and stressed that his measure did not promise to reveal anything about subjective wellbeing or life 'satisfaction'. The PQLI was designed with a very specific purpose: 'to help focus the search for strategies that might yield quicker improvements in the condition of the very poorest that can be expected if we wait for benefits to flow "naturally" from increases in national income'.⁹⁷

After Morris published his initial methods and findings, he hoped to persuade governments to use the new index. Shortly after his initial research was complete, AID sent him to India to explore options for making the PQLI central to Indian development plans. His visit came at a propitious moment. In the years after independence, postcolonial countries had often relied on colonial-era statistical offices and technical assistance from the wealthy countries to build up their statistical capabilities. By the 1960s, India had crafted an extensive statistical service, which featured a formal national Department of Statistics for national income data collection and calculations, as well as the National Sample Survey to gather information on the country's socioeconomic circumstances.⁹⁸ Over the 1970s, Indian economists debated how to use this data to measure poverty. Poverty persisted following the country's first four Five Year Plans, leaving nearly 200 million people in a precarious condition. India was the first country in the 'developing' world to make use of statistical 'poverty line' measurements. But economists such as Pranab Bardhan and Amartya Sen questioned existing metrics and sought alternative ways of identifying persistent poverty, thereby

⁹¹'A new index on the quality of life', *New York Times*, 13 March 1977, p. 125.

⁹²Seers papers, box 7, Dudley Seers, 'Note on PQLI'; 'Indexing the path to development', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 1977, p. C6; Andrew Greeley, 'The quality of life is not a product', *Chicago Tribune*, 16 June 1977, p. B4; Thomas Harford, 'Making the connections to overcome poverty', *The Guardian*, 20 August 1980, p. 15.

⁹³Douglas Rimmer, 'Review of *Measuring the condition of the world's poor: the physical quality of life index*, by Morris David Morris', *Journal of the Developing Areas*, 17, 2, 1983, pp. 268–9.

⁹⁴Charles Yost, 'A Third World success story', *Hartford Courant*, 13 February 1978, p. 14.

⁹⁵M. V. Kamath, 'A new yardstick of progress: limitations of gross national product', *Times of India*, 1 April 1977, p. 8.

⁹⁶*The quality of life concept: a potential new tool for decision-makers*, Washington, DC: The Environmental Protection Agency, 1973.

⁹⁷Morris, *Measuring the world's poor*, p. 6.

⁹⁸J. K. Ghosh, P. Maiti, T. J. Rao, and B. K. Sinha, 'Evolution of statistics in India', *International Statistical Review*, 67, 1, 1999, pp. 17–19.

helping policy-makers to craft new policies to target it. 'The Indian poor may not be accustomed to receiving much help', Sen wrote in 1974, 'but he is beginning to get used to being counted.'⁹⁹ All the new data and metrics garnered the interest of intellectuals, but to little overall effect.

In India, Morris and his wife, the economist Michelle McAlpin, travelled around the country for two weeks to meet with statisticians, collect data, and visit various government agencies. The trip resulted in a book that offered national and state-level PQLI metrics for both men and women throughout the country and compared India's results against those of other countries. The PQLI varied considerably from state to state, with communist Kerala high at the top. Because India as a whole ranked quite low, Morris and McAlpin hoped that the data would provide valuable information for a policy revolution. They aspired to create useful data for targeted, state-level policies designed to raise the PQLI. In particular, they sought to alert policy-makers about the need for policies to improve 'the status of women'.¹⁰⁰

In the end, however, the PQLI did not become an important tool in Indian politics. The absence of data for the index's key indicators was one problem. India lacked reliable statistical information for its many states, and Morris had to use some guesswork to reach his initial index for the country. He admitted as such, acknowledging that his initial data was 'not good'.¹⁰¹ Scholarly reviewers in India of Morris's work lamented how troublesome this was. One reviewer suggested that it would be 'prohibitively expensive' for the Indian national government to set up a statistical apparatus to collect the necessary information. And, as it stood, to make policy on 'such poor data' would be 'disastrous'.¹⁰² Replicating Morris's initial findings proved difficult, too. Indian economists argued over his weighting system and scaling methods for the three components of the index, which reflected the challenges inherent in determining the relative value of the various parts in an index number. By the mid 1980s, multiple efforts to experiment with alternative starting points and scaling choices were leading to considerably different results than those that Morris had presented just a half-decade earlier.¹⁰³

The PQLI's challenges went beyond data availability. Critics argued that its components did not suffice as 'satisfactory measures of human welfare'.¹⁰⁴ It reflected just one small piece of the many criticisms about what GNP excluded. For instance, one Indian observer lamented that the PQLI could not measure other important aspects of life that were also neglected by GNP, such as 'justice, political freedom or a sense of participation' in politics.¹⁰⁵ While Morris never designed the index to do so, the social indicators movement had been predicated on redirecting policy-makers' focus to 'subjective' aspects of life beyond economic notions of value. While life expectancy and literacy were non-economic variables, they could not, as many reformers hoped, reveal anything about life satisfaction or overall welfare.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, it was unclear how the publication of PQLI data connected to larger policy changes. 'A successful policy', Morris and McAlpin concluded, 'requires a high degree of popular participation and self-administration.' However, in a country as

⁹⁹ Amartya Sen, 'Poverty, inequality and unemployment: some conceptual issues in measurement', in T. N. Srinivasan and P. K. Bardhan, *Poverty and income distribution in India*, Calcutta: Statistical Publishing Society, 1974, p. 67; M. N. Srinivas, 'Village studies, participant observation and social science research in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10, 33/35, 1975, pp. 1387–94 Pranab Bardhan, ed., *Conversations between economists and anthropologists: methodological issues in measuring economic change in rural India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989; Terence J. Byres, ed., *The Indian economy: major debates since independence*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 81–2.

¹⁰⁰ Report on the potential use of the physical quality of life index in the study of the status of women in India', 21 May 1979, p. 1, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAX800.pdf (consulted 19 March 2019).

¹⁰¹ Morris, 'Physical quality of life index', p. 233; David A. Brodsky and Dani Rodrik, 'Indicators of development and data availability: the case of the PQLI', *World Development*, 9, 7, 1981, pp. 695–9.

¹⁰² K. Sundaram, 'Review of *Measuring the conditions of India's poor*', *Indian Economic Review*, 18, 2, 1983, p. 303.

¹⁰³ S. M. Vidwans, 'A critique of Mukherjee's index of physical quality of life', *Social Indicators Research*, 17, 1985, pp. 127–46.

¹⁰⁴ David A. Larson and Walton T. Wilford, 'The physical quality of life index: a useful social indicator?', *World Development*, 7, 6, 1979, p. 584.

¹⁰⁵ Kamath, 'New yardstick', p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Miles, *Social indicators*, p. 50.

administratively complex as India, this was no easy task. It was not evident how their new statistical techniques would alone engender greater participation.¹⁰⁷ The fate of the PQLI in India played out in debates in economic journals, but not on government balance sheets.

Morris's struggles with the PQLI in India spoke to broader concerns about social indicators. Were they, and indexes such as the PQLI, meant to replace growth and GNP? Or were they simply to help policy-makers ensure that the fruits of growth were widely shared? How one answered those questions suggested the priority of distributive or basic needs concerns, compared to larger national economic production. Morris himself described the PQLI in contradictory ways. In some instances, He referred to the index as a 'practical measure of social distribution that will avoid the limitations of the GNP'.¹⁰⁸ Yet he also often spoke of it as a tool to expose previously hidden or underappreciated 'factors' in spurring conventionally understood economic growth. For all the rhetoric of the PQLI as an alternative to GNP, its advocates often described it in terms of growth. Morris suggested as much. In India, he claimed, a 'proper emphasis on raising the PQLI' was 'likely to make possible a higher rate of growth'. While also hoping that it would 'ease the tensions that such growth must necessarily generate', he framed PQLI in terms of growth just the same. Subsequent observers would reiterate such criticisms, especially noting that the PQLI had little to say about distributional questions.¹⁰⁹

The PQLI faced an even larger challenge, in that many leaders in 'developing' countries viewed it with suspicion, along with the basic human needs approach to development. The Malawian scholar Thandika Mkandawire noted that, for many African leaders, moving away from growth-oriented strategies generated scepticism 'founded not only on the dismal performance by the advanced countries as supporters of the poor but also on the justifiable fear that the sudden interest of the rich countries in "poverty" was a ploy, a means of diverting attention from the real issues, namely the need for the restructuring of the world economic order' through the NIEO. The latter consisted of a radical set of proposals to reform international economic relations, to spur growth in the Global South, and to provide a material basis to generate international political equality.¹¹⁰ The Indian economist Ajit Singh claimed that 'Third World' leaders feared that metrics such as the PQLI and the basic human needs approach would 'discourage industrial development', and would place too much emphasis on rural and informal employment strategies.¹¹¹ In general, many experts and leaders from the Global South worried that a shift in donor countries' financing towards smaller-scale interventions for social objectives would enable them to shirk greater responsibilities to promote larger-scale development, and would thus perpetuate structural inequality between countries.¹¹²

In the face of such critiques, those promoting social indicators had to confront the limited utility of their metrics. Advocates for social indicators from the West often explained such responses as part of a larger struggle between reform-minded experts and obdurate 'Third World' leaders. The US AID administrator and PQLI supporter John Gilligan argued, 'When you talk of improving the economic conditions of the neglected in any society you are challenging head-on the existence of the political and economic elite'.¹¹³ Yet, for many in the 'Third World', social indicators seemed to be less a

¹⁰⁷Morris David Morris and Michelle B. McAlpin, *Measuring the condition of India's poor: the physical quality of life index*, New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1982, p. 88.

¹⁰⁸Morris, 'Physical quality of life index', p. 225.

¹⁰⁹Miles, *Social indicators*, pp. 50–4.

¹¹⁰Thandika Mkandawire, 'The new international economic order, basic needs strategies and the future of Africa', *Afrique et Développement*, 5, 3, 1980, p. 77; Gilman, 'New international economic order', p. 4;

¹¹¹Ajit Singh, 'The "basic needs" approach to development vs. the new international economic order: the significance of Third World industrialization', *World Development*, 7, 6, 1979, p. 586.

¹¹²R. Sinha, Peter Pearson, Gopal Kadekodi, and Mary Gregory, *Income distribution, growth, and basic needs in India*, London: Croom Helm, 1979, p. 19; Johan Galtung, 'The new international economic order and the basic needs approach', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 4, 4, 1979, pp. 455–76; Mahbub ul Haq, 'An international perspective on basic needs', *Finance and Development*, 17, 3, 1980, pp. 12–13; Patrick Sharma, 'Between North and South: the World Bank and the new international economic order', *Humanity*, 6, 1, 2015, pp. 189–200.

¹¹³Mark Frankland, 'An idea to end world poverty', *The Observer*, 4 September 1977, p. 6.

welcome reform and more a tool for the United States and the World Bank to thwart the radical and globally redistributive claims of ‘Third World’ activism. Without a compelling critique of historical inequalities of power between countries, social indicators advocates found diminishing enthusiasm for their product among those whom they hoped to help the most.

Although the PQLI rarely entered into formal national accounts, it inspired many wide-ranging and more enduring reform efforts. In the late 1980s, Mahbub ul Haq seized on the extensive research into social indicators to create a new development metric, the Human Development Index (HDI). Released in 1990, the HDI measured life expectancy, literacy rates, education levels, and ‘income standard of living’, which was defined by GDP per capita at purchasing power parity.¹¹⁴

Criticisms of economic growth persisted, too. Social indicators advocates, who sought development approaches that put greater emphasis on individual wellbeing, equality, and opportunity, adumbrated the rise in the 1980s and 1990s of a movement for ‘human development’, which sought to enhance ‘human capabilities’ rather than to give priority to national economic growth.¹¹⁵ These subsequent reform efforts bore many of the same intellectual hallmarks as the social indicators movement and standard of living research. They reflected a faith that sub-national, localized data on people’s consumption habits, inequalities, and social worlds offered more valuable insights to policy-makers than national economic aggregates.

While social critiques of growth continued to attract strong interest from scholars and reformers in international organizations, the context that had given rise to the social indicators movement faded, as faith in economic growth revived in the 1980s and 1990s. The international politics of measurement emerged when many experts came to accept a world in which there seemed legitimate, visible reasons to reject the pursuit of growth.¹¹⁶ Whereas notions of limits and downsides to growth suffused popular culture, political discourse, and international development policy during the 1970s, just a few years later they dissipated. In the 1980s a new ‘antistatist growthmanship’ swept through the capitalist world, buoyed by lower oil prices and the declining fortunes of communist countries.¹¹⁷ Once again leaders hailed the virtues of expanding GNP, as new ‘trickle-down’ evangelists claimed ‘not state-sponsored redistribution but the unhampered workings of growing markets would benefit even the most disadvantaged’. Thus reconfigured, the revitalized growth paradigm allowed policy-makers to avoid the interventions implied by social indicators advocates, and instead point to growing aggregate prosperity as progress.¹¹⁸ While the interest of scholars and activists in social indicators and new metrics such as the HDI persisted, it coexisted with a more powerful faith in market-oriented GNP growth.

Conclusion

The debates over the PQLI and social indicators in the 1970s reflected the longer history of debates over how best to measure society. Economic growth, expressed as changes in GNP, redefined the purpose of national governance in the twentieth century, but there were many other statistics and governing strategies that challenged the growth paradigm. From early family budget studies during Western industrialization, to the standard of living statistics in the early twentieth century, to the rise of growth as a policy-making object, to the social indicators reformers of the 1960s and 1970s, the last century and a half has been rife with debates over what the purpose of national governance should be, how government policy should be measured and assessed, and which numbers best capture what societies value. Those interested in standard of living statistics sought

¹¹⁴Stanton, ‘Human Development Index’, p. 14.

¹¹⁵Miles, *Social indicators*, pp. 114–97 Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The quality of life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹¹⁶Macekura, ‘Development and economic growth’, pp. 121–3.

¹¹⁷Collins, *More*, pp. 166–232.

¹¹⁸Schmelzer, *Hegemony of growth*, p. 327.

comparisons between classes of workers, to allow policy-makers to promote a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunity among different social groups. Although the rise of the growth paradigm obscured this tradition, the social indicators movement revived it. Advocates for social indicators questioned both the means and the ends of growth, seeking to focus on more sub-national and targeted subjects, such as individual and group inequalities, much like standard of living researchers had done. Because metrics such as the PQLI never replaced, or even complemented, GNP in most countries' accounting sheets, it is easy to dismiss the social indicators movement as a failure. But to do so would miss the richness, depth, and breadth of the debates over the meaning of development and progress across the twentieth-century world.

The debates about how best to quantify social and economic life also reflected long-standing questions of power. As Morris David Morris and many other reformers learned, meaningful development required more than just better numbers. It needed a new politics to create new policies. Yet such political change was hard to nurture. Advocates for social indicators during the 1960s and 1970s too often imparted great power to their numbers alone to build more just and equal societies. Growth theorists and social indicators activists have both downplayed to different degrees the importance of politics, defined as extended engagement with the forces and institutions that generated inequality (both between and within countries) and environmental degradation. The history of standard of living research and the social indicators movement attests to the strength of technocratic governance, both as a source for constructing measures and policies to challenge the growth paradigm, and as a constraint on imagining alternatives to it.

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