# Obstacles to Development

Mohamed Rabie

Third World nations in general have much difficulty activating their largely stagnant economies and meeting the challenges of feeding, educating and housing their growing populations. Problems facing the less developed nations are many and multi-faceted; some nations face very difficult obstacles that require new visions and sustained efforts to overcome. Nevertheless, all such nations face problems that emanate primarily from attachment to outdated values, attitudes, ways of thinking, as well as lack of appreciation for time and work. Many also face challenges emanating from high population growth rates, often high illiteracy rates, ethnic and religious conflict, outdated traditional educational systems, and political corruption. The major challenging problems, however, can be grouped under the following headings:

* + - 1. Colonial legacy;
			2. Sociocultural heritage;
			3. Economic structure;
			4. Sociopolitical structure and organization;
			5. The political context; and
			6. Conceptions of time.

###### Colonial Legacy

Most Third World nations had lived under colonial rule for a long time and were subjected to political suppression and economic exploitation, oftentimes for generations. This legacy of a hated past was used and continues to be used by traditional intellectuals, religious leaders and nationalist forces as an excuse to resist western ideas, reject progressive values and new ways of thinking, and undermine authentic calls for political reform. Traditional leaders tend to claim that the West has no real interest in helping poor nations develop their economies; instead, it is interested in reasserting its political influence, economic hegemony and cultural domination. Because of such claims, the masses have been more inclined to stick to older cultural values and traditions, oppose social and cultural change, and suspect new ideas and economic thinking and non-traditional political systems. Even democracy, despite its liberating promise, is yet to be fully embraced by the masses, or be honestly promoted by the corrupt and bankrupt political elites in most developing states.

Colonialism has also created another obstacle that continues to outlive colonialism itself; it created an economic elite whose role was to mediate between the colonizer and the colonized masses and enable the former to exploit the latter and control their fate without having to interact with them. Being a product of colonization, and because they remain closely tied to the former colonizer’s business interests, member of this elite have amassed too much power and wealth. And due to their social roots and education and connections, they are able to control the economic process and work with those controlling the political process to keep the masses largely poor and submissive. Members of these elite include importers and exporters of major commodities, agents of foreign corporations, traditional leaders, and real estate owners who have little interest in industrialization because they normally lack the necessary entrepreneurial skills that manufacturing requires. And because they have enough wealth and power to enhance their prestige without having to change, they have little reason to initiate or support economic or political reforms.

Under colonialism, modern healthcare systems were introduced in underdeveloped countries causing life expectancy to rise and child mortality rates to decline, and rates of population growth to increase rapidly. But while these developments were taking place, no new technologies and training programs were introduced to raise the productivity of labor and land to keep pace with the population growth rates. As a consequence, the traditional balance between resources, population, and technology was undermined, leading to widespread poverty, higher rates of social dependency, and sociocultural stagnation. And with the advent of globalization and the Internet, consumerism invaded most societies causing traditional cultures to loose many of their old traits. As a consequence, the balance between population, resources, technology and culture was disrupted, causing the old problems to become much more complicated and challenging.

Socio-cultural Heritage

Generally speaking, people tend to respond positively to economic incentives. However, most people belonging to old cultures tend to slow down or stop working at certain levels of income and wealth, preferring less work and more leisure time. Since the most important goal of such people is to satisfy their basic needs, they often see no reason to continue working after such needs are satisfied; contentment rather than unfulfilled expectations governs the attitudes of most Third World peoples toward work. As a consequence, some development economists were led to believe that certain cultures represent, by their very nature, formidable obstacles to development and material gain, and therefore trying to incentivize people belonging to such cultures to do otherwise is a waste of time.

People living in the agricultural age tend to work to live, not live to work, as most people in the industrial age do. The first see work as a means to generating enough money to buy food, meet basic needs and be happy, rather than a process to gain and accumulate wealth. But for people living in the industrial age, work is the primary source of personal satisfaction and social recognition. “Too many of us work to live and live to be happy. Nothing wrong with that; it just does not promote high productivity. You want high productivity? Then you should live to work and get happiness as a by-product,” wrote David Landes.[[1]](#endnote-1) People of the developing world, therefore, should be educated to view work as an end in itself and a source of happiness, or as Jubran Khalil Jubran once remarked, “Work is love made visible.”

Culture is very important to economic and non-economic development; however, it is neither the only determinant of development nor the only obstacle hindering change. “The question is not weather culture has a role but how to understand this role in the context of the broader determinants of prosperity.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Culture matters more in some societies than in others, because some cultures tend to resists certain ideas more than others, to change faster in some countries than in others, and to assume a more active role under certain circumstances than under others. To understand culture and its role in society, we have to think of it as a living creature that changes as circumstances and life conditions and incentives change. Culture was created by man in the distant past to meet his communications and socialization needs and to help him deal with life challenges emanating primarily from the social environment; as life conditions changed over time, cultures changed as well. To realize the extent of that change, we have to remember that at one point in our history all of us were hunters-gatherers before becoming farmers and industrialists, artists and thinkers, doctors and entrepreneurs.

For culture to play a positive role in societal development, the values and traditions it espouses and the attitudes it nurtures in young people must be changed to become compatible with the economic system and the goals it seeks to accomplish. A culture prevalent in an agricultural society, where contentment is a virtue, is not compatible with an economic system based on thrift; it therefore cannot facilitate the introduction of manufacturing or encourage the pursuits of happiness through hard work and material gain. The social and economic formations that industry requires to make progress are not part of traditional cultures. Therefore, culture needs to be transformed to become hospitable to new economic ideas, institutions and activities associated with manufacturing and the financial arrangements that industrial economy requires to function properly. Attitudes toward time and work and menial work in particular have to change, otherwise industries and services requiring menial work will suffer and hider development.

For example, cleaning public places like streets and health facilities is an undesirable job in most developing countries. Locals in Arab countries do not normally seek such jobs; and therefore, it is difficult to entice people to do them. While streets and public facilities get almost always cleaned, the people who do the cleaning are usually members of small, often shunned minorities, or foreign workers. And since cleaning public places is considered demeaning, standards of cleanliness are almost always below accepted health standards. Jobs that require serving people in hotels and restaurants are also not desirable, and people who perform them appear often unhappy and at times resentful. As a consequence, most people performing such jobs seldom enjoy their work or try to make a career of it. And what people do not enjoy doing; they are unlikely to learn how to do it more efficiently.

A visit to a middle class home in Cairo, for example, would reveal that the house inhabitants care a lot about their home; they keep it clean and tidy at all times; cleaning, however, is usually performed by house maids. But on the way to the house, you are likely to go through streets that are largely dirty and surrounded by decaying residential buildings. People who inherited their values from the agricultural age, be it in the Middle East, Africa, Asia or Latin America, tend to consider the doors of their homes the boundaries where their concerns and responsibilities end, and where the misuse and abuse begin. As a consequence of this attitude, the environment suffers and feels the neglect; it does not receive the attention it needs or the care it deserves.

A small country like Jordan, with only six million people and an official poverty rate of some 15 percent, has more than one million foreign workers or about 40% of its labor force. This fact might give the impression that Jordan has full employment and that its economy is thriving and in need of guest workers. On the contrary, the rate of economic growth in Jordan is low and the official rate of unemployment is over 13 percent of the labor force, despite lack of active participation by women. Most foreign workers in Jordan come from Egypt and a few Asian countries. While Egyptians clean the streets, man residential buildings in the capital, farm the land, and perform most maintenance work, the over 70,000 maids brought primarily from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines take care of children and clean the houses of the rich and the not-so-rich. Chinese, Korean, Sri Lankan, and Bengali workers, meanwhile, work in the textile industry, Jordan’s major export industry. In 2006 the Jordanian government acknowledged that the participation rate of Jordanian workers in the major industrial complex had declined to 30 percent, despite an unemployment rate in excess of 25 percent in and around the city where that complex is located.

In traditional, largely agricultural societies, participation of women in the labor force is low. Neither traditional values nor religious beliefs normally accept women as equals to men. This discrimination against women robs society of a good portion of its human capital and creates a relationship between the sexes that gives man a dominant role in society, allowing him to often exploit women and sometimes enslave them. Such discrimination is seen in assigning jobs to women that most men detest, in paying them much less than men for performing same tasks, and in the higher illiteracy rates among women. In light of the low productivity of labor in general, denying women the right to equal work and pay and education represents another obstacle that hinders change and retards societal development.

Moreover, there are other sociocultural obstacles that are politically sensitive, but need to be addressed to give development a chance. Such obstacles include a traditional educational system that gives priority to perpetuating old ideas and bad habits than to promoting critical thinking and scientific branches of knowledge. Religious teaching that impel believers to be content and accept whatever happens to them as fate are not compatible with risk taking, wealth generating, and capital accumulation. Religious teachers in Islamic countries in general tend to see their major role in society is to prepare believers for the afterlife rather than for life itself. Such a role needs to be transformed to motivate people to work and enjoy life before death arrives to put an end to their lives and dreams.

Due to improved health care and awareness and high population growth rates, life expectancy has risen in all traditional societies, causing social dependency in those societies to rise as well. People in Third World countries have today more children and live longer than at any time in history. And in view of the ever weakening traditional family ties and mutual social obligations due primarily to cultural globalization and satellite TV, poverty and dependency are becoming two major obstacles facing efforts to improve the general quality of life. Meanwhile, lack of adequate social security systems in most states has caused these problems to be aggravated and become structural. And since labor productivity is low and women participation in the labor force is modest, the future of the elderly and the poor in most Third World states looks bleak.

Thus, an effective development strategy would have to take into consideration, among other things, problems related to the low labor productivity, the relationship between men and women, the role of religion in society, the population growth rates, and addiction to bad habits like smoking; all of which are products of traditional educational systems and cultural values that do not nurture the right attitudes in people. There is also a need for new laws and regulations to address the trust deficit that is growing due to declining traditional trust and increasing life complexity in urban centers. The issue of trust and how and why a trust deficit is created is explained in chapter 8.

Economic Structure

The rich and poor in developing courtiers live in two different worlds separated by income, education, culture, knowledge and often concrete walls. The socioeconomic, sociocultural and sociopolitical gaps separating the former from the latter represent an incredible obstacle to development as well as to political stability; they limit the potential size of domestic markets and create negative feelings among the poor that cause resentment and often apathy. Resentment and apathy weaken workers desire to work hard and be productive and loyal to the businesses and public organizations they work for. Moreover, the income and educational gaps separating the rich from the poor undermine efforts to develop middle classes capable of playing active roles in the economic life of society; they often make the poor feel that no matter how hard they may try to improve the quality of their lives, life conditions will not change.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, no developing nation has or ever had a middle class; and no nation is capable of producing one at this time. What might appear to ‘experts’ a middle class is a collection of small merchants and employees who work for organizations that have different, often contradictory goals; they include business entities, government agencies, educational institutions, and the military. People who work for these entities and receive decent incomes that qualify them for middle class status have no shared interests or causes to tie them together; and therefore they have no class consciousness to motivate them to feel and act as a social class. As a consequence, they are unable to engage in economic or political activity to protect a shared interest or advance a common cause.

Richard Gill argues that nations that are poor are unable to develop, and nations that do not develop stay poor. He also asserts that traditional cultural values are obstacles that hider development. “In reality, many of the deepest and more difficult problems arise in connection with society’s attitudes and institutions.”[[3]](#endnote-3) There is no doubt that poverty and ignorance reinforce one another, and their prevalence among the majority of people in Third World states constitutes a serious social and economic problem. But despite such assertions, the experience of states like South Korea and Taiwan and China has proven that poor nations can develop and overcome poverty and ignorance, and traditional values and attitudes can be transformed and made conducive to sociopolitical change and economic development.

More than 40 years ago, Robert E. Baldwin saw wide income gaps and low per capita incomes as major causes of economic underdevelopment. He also saw problems hindering development as emanating from high birth rates, less education and skills, less technology, and the absence of entrepreneurship. He said, “The problem for those who want to devise policies for accelerating development is to discover the key variables and relationships in the development process.”[[4]](#endnote-4) But variables and relationships that constitute obstacles are not technical and socioeconomic only; they are also political and cultural. If traditional cultural values and state policies were to promote equality and social justice, good education and the right attitudes and work ethics, poorer nations would be able to gain a competitive advantage, and entrepreneurs would be encouraged to invest and create jobs for the educated and the under educated; and this, in turn, would cause income gaps to shrink, markets to expand, and further development and progress to be made.

There is a need for a national commitment to overcome economic, cultural and political obstacles that hinder societal development. Such a commitment, however, can only come through the articulation of a clear vision that acknowledges the cultural and non-cultural obstacles, defines the desired national goals, and devises practical plans to overcome the obstacles and pursue the desired goals with determination. Visions should take into consideration the facts on the ground, the state of technology in the world, the experiences of other nations, and where society needs to go; plans, meanwhile, should consider the transformation of society an integral part of everything they do. Visions without plans to realize them are mere daydreams that might be enjoyable but will end up wasting time. Plans without visions are like walking in the dark and hoping for good luck that might turn out to be a nightmare.

Sociopolitical Structure

Following independence, many Third World leaders adopted socialism and economic planning as a strategy to develop their economies and attain economic independence, not knowing that economic independence was a misconceived idea, and that it has seized to be an option since the late middle ages. But driven by a legacy of colonialism and struggle for independence, and encouraged by the Soviet Union, rulers of many newly independent states in Africa, Asia and Latin America moved to reject the capitalist system and adopt state capitalism and central planning in its stead. And since democracy is a western idea, it was portrayed and sold to peoples suffering from illiteracy and ignorance as an alien idea, incompatible with their indigenous cultures and belief systems. Soviet encouragement and western indifference made it possible for such rulers to ignore democracy and its system of checks and balances. And due to the Cold War’s security imperatives, both superpowers were mainly interested in recruiting surrogate states and foreign agents, regardless of the states’ authoritarian rule and lack of commitments to freedom, social justice, human rights and political participation.

Dictators are rulers who often lack political legitimacy but act as gods that see their peoples as slaves, not worthy of political or human rights. Their sense of greatness and condescending attitudes make authoritarian rulers feel as if they are the only people entitled to rights. Rights of others, as a consequence, become prerogatives that leaders control and can grant or hold as they wish; rulers are the ones who decide to give citizens passports or not, to allow them to drive cars or not, to provide them with jobs or not, and sometimes to let them live or not to live. In many developing states, rulers have no problem sending people to live and die in exile, denying them the right to live in their homelands and die among their families and friends. And where ideology controls politics, dictators’ cruelty is often beyond comprehension.

Ideologies tend to create mass movements and super leaders and national heroes that cause the sociocultural and socioeconomic gaps separating people on the top of the sociopolitical ladder from the rest of the population to widen, while creating new relationships that reduce the humanity of everyone involved. People on the top tend to develop a sense of superiority and divine inspiration that leads them to lose touch with reality and belittle the lives of those struggling at the bottom. But sadly enough, most of those at the bottom tend to feel that their lives are only worth what they can do in the service of their revered leaders and holy men. The bulk of the masses are thus led to accept the unacceptable, like dying for the sake of mysterious causes, and believe in the unbelievable like unproven miracles. Meanwhile, social and political critics, intellectuals and free thinkers are treated as liabilities whose suppression or outright elimination is a legitimate act to maintain political stability, ideological purity and ensure complete domination of the masses.

In fact, many rulers, including the majority of Arab and African rulers and some Asian and Latin American rulers as well have for long treated human resources in their countries as liabilities, not assets. As liabilities, human resources become a burden to be lightened, not an asset to be developed and harnessed. The educated in particular have been treated not just as liabilities but as threats to political stability and religious values and traditional ways of living; as a consequence, the Third World creative minds and the knowledge and economic potential they possess have been largely wasted.

Generally speaking, Arab regimes view every independent thinker as a threat; they tend to say, “He thinks then he is a traitor;” and traitors usually face one fate, isolation and depravation or imprisonment in dark prison cells. As for the traditional nationalists, they tend to view every thinker who calls for freedom and democracy as a foreign agent not to be trusted, they tend to say, “He thinks then he is a foreign agent;” and foreign agents usually have one fate, to be shunned and discredited. Meanwhile conservative religious forces view such individuals as infidels betraying religion; they tend to say, “He thinks then he is an atheist;” and atheists have only one fate, to be eliminated; some lucky ones end up living in exile and dying in obscurity.[[5]](#endnote-5). Because of this treatment, a large portion of the highly educated Arab men and women were forced to leave their homelands and seek refuge in western countries. In addition, millions more, despite being largely unskilled and uneducated, had to emigrate to earn a living and get a taste of the freedom others enjoy.[[6]](#endnote-6) Most Third World nations today suffer from a serious brain drain problem that makes attempts to develop national economies and transform cultures very difficult indeed.

Dictators who emerged in the wake of national independence made most citizens victims of cruel political systems, and prisoners of unenlightened social orders and oppressive cultural environments. Human rights are abused, dissent is suppressed, freedoms are confiscated, and rights of people are a privilege that rulers monopolize. The concept that rights are given at birth and that all people have equal rights were never established or promoted or even seriously considered by such rulers. And since absolute power corrupts absolutely, political and economic corruption spread and became structural; and with the passing of time, corruption became a state of mind shared and accepted by most citizens.

Traditionalism has played a role in encouraging new rulers to become authoritarian, allowing them to monopolize political power and use it to gain economic power, and employ both to suppress and oppress the masses. Nepotism is only one aspect of traditionalism that regards favoritism and discrimination against the other as legitimate. People with the right political and social connections are likely to get the jobs they desire and whatever favors they may ask for. People without the right political or social connections are unlikely to get the jobs they deserve or be granted favors they may badly need. And to get what they are entitled to in an unjust society, ordinary people are often forced to pay bribes and accept denigration and humiliation as well.

By controlling politics and economies, suppressing freedoms of speech, and treating human resources as liabilities, the average Third World state had managed to transform itself from an agent of economic change and political liberation and into an obstacle to societal development and sociocultural change and scientific and technological progress. Consequently, capital accumulation, the accumulation of knowledge, the development of human capital, and economic and political freedoms were never given a real chance, causing underdevelopment to become an oppressive state of mind and an unjust state of socioeconomic and sociopolitical affairs. A state system that controls the economy and uses it to serve politics encourages capital flight and brain drain and perpetuates underdevelopment and injustice.

For political freedom to prevail and be meaningful, it needs a just system where human rights and private property are respected and protected by law. And for societal development to have a chance, political, social, cultural and economic freedoms have to be recognized as agents of change and rights that all people should enjoy. People whose freedoms are confiscated against their will tend to hate their rulers and sometimes their countries as well; they often feel that states exist for the sole purpose of exploiting and denigrating them and keeping them suppressed. Since development is a participatory process, people living in states where freedoms are lacking are more likely to distrust governments and ignore whatever appeals governments may make for change. Under authoritarian rule, no freedoms are guaranteed, and their absence makes societal development a rather alien proposition that is hard to conceive and harder to implement.

People living in poverty and ignorance in police states do not know what they are missing or what they are entitled to in a just society. A citizen in a developing Arab, Asian, African, or Latin American country is more likely to stand in line for hours to renew a passport or obtain a birth certificate; and in the process, he is more likely to accept humiliation by state officials without complaining; such a person seldom feels that his rights are being abused and his time is being wasted. And what people do not miss having, people are less likely to ask for, and what people do not ask for, they are unlikely to get, especially in an authoritarian state. Polls taken in Egypt following the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and the end of his dictatorship indicated that over 70 percent of the people who supported the revolution did so for economic reasons, and less than 20 percent participated in the revolution for political reasons.

Outside help to make people more aware of what they are missing, and international pressure to impel dictators to give people their rights are needed to pave the way for change. “So powerful are the barriers to evolutionary social change that fundamental institutional change typically results from external shocks rather than from internal evolution.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Meier says, “While economists can specify how to create efficient economic markets, it is more daunting and ambiguous task to determine the conditions for ‘efficient political markets’ that will determine the development of the new economic markets.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Nevertheless, the Great Recession has proven that American economists have failed to create efficient economic markets, and American politicians have failed to create efficient political markets. This implies that even western states need to restructure their economic and political markets to make them fair and efficient, which cannot be done without transforming their national cultures.

The Political Context

Low economic growth rates is a phenomenon most developing nations, with few exceptions, share. Yet, they are nations that have little in common in terms of natural resources, capital accumulation, population size, literacy rates, quality of education, technical and scientific knowledge, history or culture. In fact, neither natural resources, nor populations, nor any other factor could explain by itself the causes of development or lack of development in any country. There is no doubt that each factor has a role to play in facilitating or hindering development. However, the role of politics in the development process has received little attention.

Politics in most countries represent the larger context within which the economy and most other systems function. When politics dominate society, it dominates the economy as well, enabling politicians to use the economy as an efficient tool to serve their interests. And as economies grow and their role in societal life expands, the dominant political elite in every developing society is able to gain a great deal of power and wealth, controlling both politics and economics to enrich itself at the expense of individual rights, the poor, the environment, the country, and the future of generations to come.

For example, the economic performance of Nigeria, which is rich in natural resources and has a large population and substantial revenues from oil exports, is less impressive than that of Bangladesh which is densely populated and has less land and natural resources and no oil. Saudi Arabia, with a relatively small population, a vast land area, and a tremendous income from oil exports, has failed to perform as well as Taiwan which is largely resource poor and has more people. Austria and Hungary are so close in population size, culture, location and resources, yet they differ in terms of standards of living and quality of life. While natural resources, technology, capital, education, and populations play important roles in determining the capacity of each nation to develop, they cannot by themselves explain the vast differences in the levels of development achieved by so many diversified countries and peoples.

Theories of economic development in general have failed to seriously consider the role of politics in societal development; politics can be a force to invigorate economic growth, as well as an impediment retarding sociocultural transformation. The interaction between the political process and the economic process is a major factor influencing the wider issues of social peace, poverty, social justice, security, freedom, economic dynamism, and political stability. Most developing nations, due primarily to political instability and authoritarian rule, are neither at peace with themselves nor at ease with the world around them; they seem unable to develop workable plans to initiate sociocultural change or economic development.

Political stability, social and religious freedoms, and social peace contribute to enhancing democracy and creating environments conducive to attracting foreign investment; they enable intellectuals, educators, and social activists to debate issues such as economic restructuring, educational reform, political corruption, and the institutionalization of knowledge in society. When a nation is at peace with itself, it tends to be more concerned with economic issues, and therefore tolerate political dissent and cultural diversity, but not governmental mistakes and bureaucratic misconduct and business corruption. In contrast, when a nation is at war or under a threat of war, it tends to be more concerned with political and security issues and, therefore, more tolerant of governmental mistakes, even abuses of power and individual human rights, but less tolerant of political dissent. Patriotism demands solidarity and sacrifices in times of war, but calls for open debate and accountability in times of peace.

The two decades following World War II had witnessed the independence of many African and Asian nations and the emergence of the Third World. But instead of imitating the industrialized West, the new states, due primarily to their experience with colonialism, decided to reject capitalism and democracy and limit foreign investment in their countries. And to strengthen economic independence, many states moved to nationalize the major industrial and service enterprises, causing a new system of state capitalism to emerge. State control of these industries was viewed as a symbol of independence and liberation from foreign hegemony. Consequently, the state bureaucracy was put in charge of managing the newly-born national economies, causing the size of bureaucracies to increase substantially. Bureaucracies, however, are ill-equipped to manage largely poor and struggling economies in need of new ideas and a sense of direction. Bureaucracies, by their very nature, tend to be conservative and to lack imagination; they are usually managed by officials trained in the art of running stable systems. Since modern economies grow as a result of decisions that involve risk taking, bureaucracies have failed to lead, causing most economies to suffer serious setbacks and miss their goals.

“In 1973, European-owned small-and medium-sized businesses in trade, agriculture and light industry [in Zaire] were confiscated. But instead of being sold to experienced African entrepreneurs, they were mostly given to about 2000 ‘acquirers’; powerful members of the governing political elite and bureaucracy closely linked to, and dependent on Mobutu’s system of authoritarian personal rule. There followed a period of severe economic disruption caused partly by the incompetent and avaricious way in which this commercially inexperienced class of acquirers managed their enterprises,”[[9]](#endnote-9) wrote Paul Kennedy. The example of Zaire was repeated in several other countries causing national economies to be disrupted, per capita incomes to often decline, the income and wealth gaps to widen, and poverty to spread and become endemic. In Latin America, for example, the decade of the 1980s was a lost decade during which inflation rates skyrocketed, per capita incomes declined, corruption spread, and political instability worsened. Recent international economic indicators show that many Third World nations have suffered steep declines in their per capita incomes since the early 1990s.

Feeling threatened and incompetent, the ruling classes in most developing countries moved in the 1970s to tighten political and security control over the masses and concentrate economic and political powers in their hands. Building strong armies and well trained security agencies, controlling the media, and using coercion to co-opt intellectuals and silence dissent became standard procedures used by dictators to stay in power. Subsequently, the new state system emerged as a criminal enterprise to repress the masses, exploit national economies, and perpetuate individual injustice and collective inequality. Through its five major organs: the army, the police force, the secret service, the bureaucracy, and the mass media, the state became a major obstacle to change, suppressing individual initiative and creativity, and stifling scientific and philosophical inquiry. As a result, sociopolitical and sociocultural changes began to move in place without moving in time, causing society to remain mired in a state of underdevelopment, missing one opportunity after the other.

The army emerged gradually as the instrument through which political power was seized and maintained; the police force became an effective instrument to harass the masses and perpetuate political control. The bureaucracy became the major state institution through which power was exercised and people’s rights were abused. And the secret service suddenly emerged as a tool to suppress freedom of speech and repress all acts of political dissent; even mild criticism of corrupt state officials was not tolerated. Meanwhile, the media emerged as a machine to undermine the opposition, support states’ claims of legitimacy, mold and remold people’s attitudes, and falsify their consciousness. Consequently, no authoritarian state that adopted capitalism or socialism or Marxism or state capitalism was able to achieve its economic goals, free its people from need, or reduce economic and non-economic dependency on the industrial world in a meaningful way. States that began to develop in the 1970s were able to do so only after abandoning the political and economic philosophy of total control.

The politicization of economics by Third World states in general has facilitated the growth of big governments and cancerous bureaucracies. Bloated bureaucracies tend to confuse issues and muddle responsibility, making it difficult to hold state officials accountable; they also cause political and economic corruption to become the norm rather than the exception. To protect elite interests and disguise waste and economic corruption, dictatorial regimes often resort to consolidating political and military powers in the hands of one man, and to exaggerating foreign and domestic threats to national unity and integrity. And when faced with mass movements calling for change, they often go to war to silence criticism and demand allegiance to the flag. Thus, keeping a nation at war or under an illusion of being threatened by war has become a favorite game most Third World rulers enjoy playing.

During the 1960s and 1970s most Third World states witnessed the gradual emergence of a consumer society and came to be dominated by authoritarian political and military elites. National savings generated by merchants, agents of foreign corporations, bankers and politicians were deposited in personal foreign bank accounts instead of being invested in local and national economies. Most of the funds received in the form of loans and foreign aid during that period were stolen by dictators and corrupt politicians and their business partners to further enrich the rich and impoverish the poor. Lord Peter Bauer called foreign aid “an excellent method for transferring money from poor people in rich countries to rich people in poor countries.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

For example, in a largely poor Arab country the financial assets of the speaker of parliament were estimated to have reached $3 billion in 2006. And when a leader of another economically and politically struggling Arab country was asked by a journalist about the size of his wealth, he answered, “Do you mean before asking me this question or after?” When Mr. Mobutu the late president of Zaire died in 1997, his foreign assets were estimated at $7 billion, far more than the entire GDP of the country he ruled for decades.

Today, attempts by giant corporations to explore every business opportunity available anywhere in the world are leading them to invest in new places, establish operations in foreign countries, and open new export markets. Countries that have well-trained and disciplined labor forces and fairly developed infrastructures and enjoy political stability are being favored. States that lack political stability, sufficient physical and social infrastructure and have poorly trained manpower are being ignored. Nations that lie in between, just like most Arab and Latin American states, are expected to experience limited success in attracting foreign capital, and significant failures in initiating development processes on their own.

Conceptions of Time

Peoples living in different civilizations view time differently; some are able to understand the value of time and the imperatives of the times they live in; others are more likely to view time as a problem and treat it as a liability. The first is more likely to utilize time efficiently; the latter is more likely to waste time without feeling the loss of anything of value. Time and how different peoples perceive it and deal with it have affected people’s lives and influenced the degree of progress they made throughout history. No nation could escape the imperatives of the times, and no future could be constructed without a clear conception of time.

Wherever and whenever time is perceived as an asset, people tend to make the best use of the time available to them. And by so doing, they are usually able to make substantial progress in all areas of human endeavor, and get more life enjoyment. And wherever and whenever time is perceived as having little or no particular value, people tend to waste most of it. And by so doing, they fail to recognize opportunities, develop their economies, transform their cultures and make progress. And wherever and whenever time is perceived as a liability, people tend to feel happy wasting a good portion of their lives and money to get rid of time.

While most people appreciate the value of time these days, most people throughout history have had little respect for time. In fact, until recently in human history, time was perceived more of a liability and less of an asset by almost all peoples of the world. People were not jus happy to waste time; but ready to devote a lot of their talents and energies to see time vanishes. But time does not vanish; it only disguises itself temporarily, and in the process, it penalizes people and nations that fail to appreciate its role in individual and societal lives.

The tribal society, which appeared in its primitive form about 30,000 years ago, had no particular conception of time; tribal people could not understand the challenges time posed to them individually or collectively. Instead of changing their ways of living to face the challenges of time, tribesmen were able to go around time and preserve their freedom and traditions and customs. But going around time dictated that tribes move from one region to another, seeking more hospitable environments, comfortable weather and better life conditions. Having no clear conception of time had helped tribal society keep its freedom, but it denied it the opportunity to transform its social environment and economic conditions, develop more efficient means of survival and enhance its security.

When agriculture was developed about 10,000 years ago, people began to settle down, build villages, towns and states and develop new ways to manage their farms and water resources. In order to improve their chances of survival in good and bad times, farmers began to invent new farming and irrigation systems and tools, build better houses more resistant to cold and hot weather, develop new ways to preserve food products, build roads to facilitate trade, and construct dams to store water and protect themselves and their property from seasonal floods. Consequently, agricultural people, slowly but surely, developed a clear conception of time and understood some of its challenges and the role it played in their lives, which led them to adjust their cultures in response to the imperatives of time.

Nevertheless, time throughout the agricultural age and among all peoples who lived and still live in that age, was largely perceived as a liability, not an asset. People waiting for the arrival of the planting and harvesting seasons and rain wished that time passes by fast. And to make sure it goes by fast, ideas to waste time began to appear and claim priority in people’s minds and daily activities. As a consequence, people were led to invent games and social activities to dispose of time. The challenge posed by time, therefore, was largely viewed as a negative one; and because of that view, agricultural society made little economic and cultural progress over thousands of years.

For example, traditional Arab societies whose cultures are rooted in the agricultural and tribal ages have continued to devote precious time to inventing new, often health damaging habits to waste time. The widespread usage of the water pipe or *argeelah* in most Arab states is the latest and probably the most socially damaging and economically wasteful invention that has so far been invented by man. Its destructive effects go far beyond the financial cost and the creation of serious health and environmental hazards, it nurtures a new generation of Arab youth devoid of work ethics and environmental concerns and has little or no respect for the rights of people who do not smoke; it is a generation that sees self-destruction and time wasting as a source of particular pleasure. But treating the self, time, money and the other in this fashion causes addiction to smoking cigarettes and the *argeelah* to become endemic, which undermines the will of the addicted to resist other socially undesirable temptations of life.

As a consequence of these bad habits and attitudes, serious issues, such as reading, working hard, helping the needy, serving community, and planning for future careers, have become secondary issues, sometimes non-issues. And what makes the smoking of the *argeelah* in particular so troubling is that a high percentage of parents encourage their teenagers, boys and girls alike, to engage in it and live its fantasy. This makes the *argeelah* not a passing phenomena but a long term problem that is certain to have negative consequences on Arab culture in general and labor productivity and societal development in particular. A section will be devoted to discussing the issue of smoking and its impact on society in chapter 12.

When the industrial revolution arrived about 250 years ago, a new conception of time slowly evolved that viewed time as money. Farmers who lost their land to Europe’s land aristocracy had only their labor and time to sell to earn a living and survive. Consequently, the phrase “time is money” was coined and people began to seek new ways to maximize the utility of their time. Capitalists and managers alike began to invent new systems to maximize the output produced by each worker in any given period of time. Competition, productivity of labor, efficiency of machines and knowledge became magic words motivating managers to save time, and inducing workers to maximize the utility of time. In Japan, for example, workers brag about the amount of extra time they give to their companies; Japanese workers tend to believe that job security and personal welfare is a function of the welfare of the companies they work for. The same attitude is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception in China.

Today, people who are deeply involved in making the knowledge age a reality are engaged in the most intensive processes to invent ways to utilize the fraction of the second. As a consequence, time has become the most valuable asset that knowledge workers such as scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, advertisers, financial and corporate managers and thinkers have. And with this much awareness of the value of time, the income and wealth gaps separating traditional tribal and agricultural societies from the industrial and knowledge ones have widened further. For example, it is estimated that the richest 20 percent of the world’s population consumed in 2005 about 77 percent of the world’s total consumption, while the poorest 20 percent consumed 1.5 percent of that total.[[11]](#endnote-11) As for production, it is estimated that the world’s richest countries, whose population is approximately one billion, produced in 2006 about $36.6 trillion of the world’s GDP; and the poorest countries, with a population of 2.4 billion, produced about $1.6 trillion. This means that while the richest nations accounted for 76 percent of the world’s GDP, the poorest ones accounted for 3.3 percent only.[[12]](#endnote-12) And as income, wealth, production and consumption gaps widen, the knowledge and sociocultural gaps deepen, making the development of traditional societies a highly challenging task.

People who see time as a liability tend to emphasize the past and deemphasize the future. In contrast, people who see time as an asset tend to emphasize the future and deemphasize the past. Since the past represents our collective memories, giving priority to memories enables us to avoid facing the challenges of the present, ignore the future, and waste our time thinking how to revive the long lost “golden age.” But past history has no valid wisdom to give or experience to emulate, living its fantasy makes the future a fate to be accepted, not a project to be consciously constructed. In fact, no progress can be made by focusing on the past; only keeping an eye on the future and viewing time as a challenge can help us build a better, more enjoyable life, and shape a more promising future for our children and grandchildren. Thus, without recognizing the value of time and the imperatives of the times we live in, we are unable to visualize and conceptualize a promising future for all.

1. David Landes, “Culture Makes Almost All the Difference,” in *Culture Matters*, Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel Huntington, editors, (Basic Books, 2000) 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michael E. Porter, “Attitudes, Values, Beliefs, and the Microeconomics of Prosperity,” in *Culture Matters*, 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Gill, *Economic Development: Past and Present,* (Prentice Hall,1967)32 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Baldwin: *Economic Development and Growth,* (John Wily & Sons 1966) 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mohamed Rabie, *The Other Face of the Arab Defeat*, (Riyad El Rayyes Publishers, 1987) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Mohamed Rabie, *Culture and the Arab Identity Crisis*, (The Arab Thought Forum, 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jeffrey Sachs, “Notes on a New Sociology of Development,” in *Culture Matters*, 34 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gerald Meier, *Biography of a Subject: An Evolution of Development Economics*, (Oxford University Press, 2005) 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Paul Kennedy: *African Capitalism,* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 69-70 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Razeen Sally, Aid, Trade, Development: the Bauer Legacy, Global Dimensions, June 2002 http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/globalDimensions/research/aidTradeDevelopment/Default.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. World Bank Development Indicators 2008, http://www.globalissues.org/print/article/26 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Global Issues, http://www.globalissues.org/print/article/26 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)