How Arrogance Calls Development into Question
A commentary on the corona crisis from Vietnam

AUTHORS

Julia Behrens, Philip Degenhardt

"The faster and more consistent compliance with pandemic containment requirements, the more lives can be saved. "

A quarantined street in Hanoi, March 10, 2020, picture alliance/REUTERS

Disbelief, horror, astonishment—these days, when there are reports on the Vietnamese news about how Europe is handling the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are literally no longer able to understand the world. Comments on Facebook and in personal conversations reveal the change of tenor: "I thought Europe was civilized and developed", "But Europe is rich and Vietnam is poor, why can't they get it right?", "Why is Europe letting its people die?" The prevailing image of Europe among the Vietnamese population is crumbling, and with it the perception of what "civilized", "rich", and "developed" actually mean.

While Vietnam was struggling with its first cases of the new Coronavirus, many Europeans thought that Corona was just a brand of beer. In Vietnam, the fight against the epidemic began after Vietnamese New Year at the end of January, when schools and universities across the country were closed due to the news arriving from neighbouring China. The Vietnamese state reacted immediately when the first people tested positive for COVID-19, and began isolating the districts where the virus had appeared. The common border with China was closed and the first returnees were required to go into domestic quarantine. No new cases occurred for almost three weeks, until "Patient #17", a Vietnamese woman who had been visiting Fashion Week in Italy, heralded the second wave of infections. Vietnam continues to follow the line it has taken: people who have had up to fourth-degree contact with

an infected person are being quarantined, and schools and universities remain closed. Vietnam has learned from past crises, such as the SARS epidemic.

Meanwhile, public life in Europe is at a standstill. The situation is so drastic that Italy has to weigh up which patients can be treated and which cannot. Germany needs more breathing masks, there is not enough protective clothing for medical staff in Britain, the USA is short on respirators and much else. The news in the Southeast Asian media abounds in images of empty European supermarkets and people hoarding toilet paper. It seems hard to understand why nothing is lacking in the stores and supermarkets in Vietnam, not even disinfectants or face masks. Some voices blame the Vietnamese state's authoritarian approach. It is certainly true that the lack of data protection in Vietnam makes it much easier to track potentially infected persons.

But another reason for all this is to be found the socio-political self-understanding of the Western world. The current crisis shows once again how useless and dangerous the concept of development is. The "developed West" versus the "underdeveloped rest" is an image that is detrimental to both sides of an artificially created opposition.

The arrogance in Europe and North America was shown in how they relied on their own development in order not to have to worry too much about a virus that China had warned of early on. Among other things, this led to political decision-makers wasting valuable time in preparing for the coming crisis. On 31 December 2019, China gave the first warning of what was to come. Nevertheless, nobody thought of retrofitting hospitals, increasing the production of protective clothing and breathing masks, or restricting public access to protect risk groups and public life.

A look at the USA also shows the size of the gap between perception and reality in terms of "development". The US health care system is threatening to collapse, while lack of health care for all and the privatization and neo-liberalization of the health care sector have destroyed capacities for crisis management. Both privatization and economic liberalization are conditions often linked with lending in development aid. Countries in the Global South are supposed to adapt to the standards set in the Global North, and develop in that direction. But for what? Meanwhile, voices from the US Senate are urging not to fight the pandemic with all available means—in order to save the stock market, even if people have to die for it. People with a Vietnamese or Taiwanese immigrant background are now making their way back to their former homeland because it seems safer for them there at the moment. What kind of development model is that?

A technocratic and capitalist one, in which a society's value is measured solely by its productive capacity. Cultural, historical, and social factors are ignored. But it is precisely these factors that are proving vital in the current situation. Solidarity, cooperation, thinking about "we" instead of "I" are values that prevent hoarding and make a quick response to the crisis possible. The quicker and more uniformly the requirements to contain the pandemic are complied with, the more lives can be saved. In general, the ability to cooperate and communicate helps make a society more resilient. Since this will not be the last crisis of global proportions in the near future, hopefully people will learn that measuring a country's GDP does not reveal much.

In Vietnam, it is dawning on some that the constructed divisions around the concept of "development" are not immutable truths. The fact that the positive image of the West is crumbling in Vietnam also has unfortunate consequences for the (mainly white) Westerners living there. It is increasingly common for people fitting the 'European-looking' stereotype to be verbally attacked. A few restaurants and shops are banning foreign guests,

hotels are turning foreign tourists away, and verbal disputes occur as soon as a white person defies the rules and, for example, enters a public space without a breathing mask. Those affected by this are outraged, and do not reflect on the fact that people who are read as Asian in Europe have been struggling with these problems for much longer, even though they were born and raised in Europe. Moreover, people who react in this way are failing to notice how their own arrogance is contributing to the hostile reactions. It is disrespectful, and ultimately a form of racism, to defy public ordinances that require the wearing of breathing masks simply because you consider yourself better informed by the media from your home country.

Now would be a good time to think—from the home office, of course—about the concept of "development". About what it actually means to be developed and where this definition comes from. The critique of the concept of development and the associated policy of development aid is by no means new. For example, in his 1995 book Encountering Development, Arturo Escobar argued that "development" reproduces colonial power structures and dependencies under a new guise. This includes, among other things, the stipulation of what the goal and mode of this development is. The main focus has always been on economic growth according to capitalist principles of value creation. Measures implemented according to these paradigms have demonstrably destroyed social and cultural structures all over the world. What "development" has thus far failed to do is eliminate social inequality; in fact, it is even being reinforced. Not only in the Global South but also within Germany, Europe, and globally.

It has become clear, precisely within the supposedly developed countries, that economic prosperity does not benefit everyone, and indeed leaves many to fall by the wayside. This crisis will have a far more severe impact on disadvantaged groups such as the illegalized, the homeless, the precariously employed, and women, than on those with financial reserves, who own their own homes and have better access to the healthcare system.

At a moment of crisis, when many structures are being challenged by sheer necessity, it would be logical to consider collectively how resilience can be strengthened and social inequality can be eliminated at various levels. This will also means redefining the approach we want to take to the impending climate crisis.

[Translated by Hunter Bolin and Sam Langer for Gegensatz Translation Collective]