



# Society & Natural Resources

An International Journal

ISSN: 0894-1920 (Print) 1521-0723 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usnr20>

## The End of Development: A Global History of Poverty and Prosperity

Laura N. H. Verbrugge

To cite this article: Laura N. H. Verbrugge (2018): The End of Development: A Global History of Poverty and Prosperity, *Society & Natural Resources*, DOI: [10.1080/08941920.2018.1471178](https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1471178)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1471178>



Published online: 04 Jun 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 31



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The End of Development: A Global History of Poverty and Prosperity**, by Brooks, A., London: ZED Books, 2017. 286 pp. ISBN: 978-1-78699-020-4 (paperback).

Why are some parts of the world poor and others rich? This intriguing question lies at the heart of Andrew Brooks' new book in which he presents a global history of poverty and prosperity, culminating in what he argues is the end of development. Cutting through critical issues of exploitation and injustice, the book makes the bold statement that development aid is guilty of re-creating and reinforcing global inequalities and persistent poverty in the Global South. Published by ZED Books, a platform for marginalized voices around the globe, it succeeds in telling the counter-narrative of "development" by showing that more prosperity does not mean less poverty.

In the book, Brooks makes the distinction between two main categorizations of development. Capitalist development refers to the geographical spread of capitalist systems in tandem with colonialism starting in the 15th century. International development refers to specific, deliberate development programs, including government aid through international institutions such as the World Bank and United Nations. These programs were a counter movement to help countries suffering from the repression of colonial powers. By showing how development aid has "not just spread money and technology, but also ideas and ideology" (Brooks 2017, p. 244), the author approaches development practices from a post-colonial perspective. The book is rich in examples and figures supporting the main argument that inequality is central to capitalist development, and sheds light on the somewhat stained origin of now popularized terms as the "Wild West" and "Banana Republic".

A central notion in the book is the importance of considering human-nature relationships for understanding the uneven progress of humanity. The first part of the book (*Making the Modern World*) focuses on the relation between the environment and capitalist development. Here, Brooks sharply rejects the notion of environmental determinism and argues that humans actively shape and change their environment. He further explains how different modes of production (from early agricultural societies to feudal states and colonial capitalism) finally led to European and North American domination over the world.

In the second part of the book (*Development and Change*), he counterposes traditional values of indigenous communities to modernization practices of their colonizers. Aptly describing modernization as "the reworking of the natural environment in the name of development" (idem, p. 114), he outlines how the construction of dams in African rivers had devastating impacts on local communities while providing huge profits for the investing countries. The observation that there is a "tension between sustaining the natural environment and developing human society" (idem, p. 203) is obviously not new. However, the book is effective in revealing how the capitalist way of commodifying ecosystems, whether it concerns copper mining, oil extraction, or dam building in rivers, is widening the gap between the Global North and Global South. The exploitation of natural resources by foreign governments is still common practice in the Global South. While this certainly raises some pertinent questions about our notion of "sustainable development", it also stands in sharp contrast to current (river) restorations discourses in Europe and North America, which aim to reverse human influence (Sneddon, Barraud, and Germaine 2017).

The strongest part of the book is when the author draws on his own experiences and research on political and economic change in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, he effectively debunks the success story of Africa, where GDP growth has not led to more jobs or social progress. His reflections on "change without change" leave the reader with a bleak picture.

While countries in the Global South have some level of autonomy in making economic policy decisions, this seems to end up in a choice between two evils: either submitting to structural reforms in order to get development aid from the Global North, or swapping access to their natural resources for infrastructure funding and development from the rising BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries. Either way, this dependency on global politics and economic developments makes achieving structural change on a national level extremely difficult.

But, does the book deliver on its promise to tell the reader whether international development has been a success or a failure? And what prospects does the author offer for the future? In that sense, the final chapter is somewhat disappointing, as it mainly summarizes the findings from the previous chapters. The main conclusion that we have to think about different ways to organize our society is unsurprising and does not advance the scholarly debate. Simply putting a cross through development is not very helpful in this respect. The rising of new economic powers and the diversification of political systems, for example in the BRICS countries, show that it makes no sense to speak of an “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989). Instead, it raises a pile of new questions to understand the interactions between societies and natural resources in a broader array of political and institutional contexts (Sonnenfeld and Taylor 2018). We can only learn so much from history.

Despite this lack of proposed alternatives, the book is an essential reading for students and researchers active in the field of sustainable natural resource management. It is a highly engaging and accessible work that explains the fundamental historical and political contexts needed for understanding structures of dependency and their impact on the Global South. It reminds us that in times of global environmental change, we are highly in need of interdisciplinary perspectives, linking ecology, economy, and social and political sciences, just to name a few.

## References

- Brooks, A. 2017. *The end of development: A global history of poverty and prosperity*. London: ZED Books.
- Fukuyama, F. 1989. The end of history? *The National Interest* 16:3–18.
- Sneddon, C. S., R. Barraud, and M. A. Germaine. 2017. Dam removals and river restoration in international perspective. *Water Alternatives* 10:648–654.
- Sonnenfeld, D. A., and P. L. Taylor. 2018. Liberalism, illiberalism, and the environment. *Society and Natural Resources* 31 (5):515–524. doi:[10.1080/08941920.2018.1436375](https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1436375).

Laura N. H. Verbrugge 

*Department of Water Engineering and Management, University of Twente, Enschede,  
The Netherlands*

Currently pursuing a MSc degree in Communication for Development at Malmö  
University, Sweden

 [lauraverbrugge1@gmail.com](mailto:lauraverbrugge1@gmail.com)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2888-9027>

Received 24 March 2018; revised 12 April 2018; accepted 21 April 2018

© 2018 Taylor & Francis  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2018.1471178>

