

LEARNING TO UNLEARN FROM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper sketches a picture, with broad strokes on a wide canvas, of thinking about, and outcomes in, development during the second half of the twentieth century, to stress the importance of learning and unlearning from experience. In doing so, it questions the caricature distinctions between success and failure at development, in a world where outcomes were mixed. This is vividly illustrated by a tale of two countries: China and India. In this span of time, thinking about development witnessed a complete swing of the pendulum, from the Development Consensus to the Washington Consensus. These shifts in paradigm, which reshaped strategies of development, were strongly influenced by history and conjuncture, reinforced by the dominant political ideology of the times. However, changes in development strategies did not lead to the expected outcomes. In fact, there was a discernible mismatch between turning points in thinking and performance. Of course, experience of the past 50 years did lead to some rethinking about development. This learning from experience, however, was selective. And it differed across schools of thought. For it was shaped only in part by outcomes. It was also significantly influenced by priors in thinking and ideology in perspectives. Thus, attempts to unlearn from development, which questioned beliefs or changed priors embedded in ideologies, were few and far between.