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History-Geography

“Examine the causes of underdevelopment and evaluate the strategies put in place to improve the quality of life in LEDCs.”

Many of today's countries are plagued by underdevelopment, notably the countries of the “economical south”. In many cases, this underdevelopment severely limits the growth of the affected countries, often leaving them in a sort of a vicious cycle: “we are underdeveloped because we have difficulties with growth because we are underdeveloped...” However, there is a big international movement to fight underdevelopment.

We can divide the causes of underdevelopment into 2 major categories: demographic issues and economical and political issues.

Demographics play an important role in the development of countries: they show the evolution of the population, its strengths and weaknesses, its needs and problems. This holds true in cases of underdeveloped countries, where the demographic factors are mostly disadvantageous. In most of underdeveloped countries, like Gambia or Uganda, the population faces numerous issues, such as lack of education, provoked by a lack of schools and money to fund them, often leaving the population with only the most basic education, and with not everyone able to afford secondary education. Another problem is malnutrition of the population, often seen in the poorer parts of the population, leading to health problems, facilitating the spread of diseases such as malaria, and reducing the overall efficiency of the population. The general poverty is also a main problem, reinforcing the problems stated previously, but also leaving families in miserable living conditions, often leaving them without basic services like immediate access to clean water, no electricity, with numerous hazards to the health. Many of these problems link to the economical weakness of the country and the population, leaving the population rapidly growing and further deepening these problems.

Besides the demographic problems, there's the weaknesses coming from the country's economical and political problems. Starting with the economical problems, one can concentrate of these countries resources, or even their absence. In Uganda's case, the main economical resource used for export is coffee, showing Uganda's reliance on primary resources and their fluctuating price. The underdeveloped countries efforts to make their economy work is also undermined by unfair trading, making these underdeveloped economies even less competitive on the global market, and furthering the spiral of underdevelopment: we can take as an example Uganda's agriculture falling off when compared to the EU's protectionism with its tariffs and subsidies to farming. Their economical situation is also worsened by the crippling debt that these underdeveloped countries amassed over the years. Often these economic problems are caused by, or are accompanied by underlying political problems: during 1971-1979, Uganda saw a period of severe downturn with a military dictatorship and a civil war that was fuelled by foreign loans and provoking a severe downturn in Uganda's economy and exports. At the end of that period, Uganda found itself with a severely weakened economy, and millions of debt that quickly increased exponentially when global interest rates doubled, rendering Uganda unable to pay off its debt and generating an enormous strain on the Ugandan economy. South Africa went through the “Apartheid”, effectively segregating the society into 2 categories: the rich whites and the poor blacks. With the inequality created by the “Apartheid”, South African people slowly starts to show some features of an underdeveloped country, with the black populace living conditions not improving, or even degrading.

Underdevelopment is caused by many factors, of which we can primarly take the demographic issues of poverty, malnutrition and disease, as well as the economic issues of resource management, debt, unfair trade and foreign demands to cut austerity measures, alongside different wars and bad governance.

Faced with underdevelopment, multiple actors attempt to take some action to combat this issue amongst the LEDCs. Similarly to the causes of underdevelopment, we can distinguish efforts to fix demographic issues, and initiatives to help the economy.

One of the underlying problems of LEDCs are their demographic weaknesses. The most apparent are the lack of education and overpopulation caused by high fertility rate. The lack of education can cause a series of problems, such as a stagnation of the population in low-end spectrum of the economy, successfully limiting the development of the economy into a higher-end activities. The lack of education can also link to the development of the population, notably its high fertility rate. However, governments are trying to improve the level of education in their countries. Uganda, for example, is trying to improve its female education. With the money received from the debt cancellation from the major actors of the “economical north”, the government of Uganda invested into the development of education (going from spending 1.5% of it's GDP on education in 1991 to 5.2% in 2002), notably free primary schooling, rising the primary education attendance from 62.3% in 2000 to 92-94% in 2006, with girls benefiting the most. This investment in education can have a very good result, not only giving the economy the chance to lift itself from the most basic activities, but by educating girls, Uganda's population can only benefit: not only educated women will defer marriage to lower the fertility rate down, but they will also be more likely to chose their own career, and continue it after marriage, further strengthening the economy of Uganda. Also, their infants won't be as likely to die, further encouraging a lower fertility rate. But in Uganda, the money from debt cancellation didn't go only into education: a part of the 1.5 billion pounds also went into public services, bringing a program of free basic healthcare, as well as developing the water system, having 2.2 millions people gain access to clean water. However, this policy of debt cancellation was extended to only few LEDCs, mainly the ones with the biggest debts, leaving the other part outside of the plan. Also, some of the countries just dive back into debt because of their weak economy. Another demographic issue is addressed by both governments and NGOs: overpopulation and high fertility rates. A part of this issue is already addressed by better female education, however governments and NGOs launch campaigns to inform the population about contraceptives, increase their availability in LEDCs, and promote family planning in concerned countries.

While demographics are a concern, the main part of the equation about underdevelopment is the economical aspect: without investment in the LEDCs economic activities, the countries will go out of underdevelopment very slowly. To deal with it, multiple actors favour encouraging the LEDCs to focus on their trade: still using Uganda as an example, its economy plainly crashed during the civil war, bringing the cotton production from 80000 to 5000 tonnes and tea from 21000 to 3000 tonnes, effectively crashing Uganda's exports, as well as lowering foreign investment. However, after the war the economy has been slowly recovering, averaging 6% during the 90's. On the other hand, to pass down this income to the poor, the Ugandan government decided to shift its export focus not on unprocessed primary goods, but concentrate instead on developing processing facilities in Uganda, which would boost Uganda's income, protect it better against the price fluctuations and create jobs for the population where around 35% of the population is unemployed. In order to improve the economy, Uganda also arranged a deal with the IMF and the World Bank to bring it out of debt and weak economy by, ironically, lending more money. However, it was done under the condition that Uganda would undergo significant restructuring plans, which largely involved trade liberalisation and cutting government spending, which hit both the farmers in Uganda, who found themselves unable to export their newly adapted cash crops by themselves and enabling multiple middlemen who could exploit the farmers, the new owners of privatised industries would cut their costs by reducing the size of the workforce, and the government couldn't spend as much as it could into education and healthcare, forcing it to charge for them and leave these services out of reach for the poorest of Ugandans. The IMF insists on calling Uganda a success story with it's economic growth averaging 5.6% between 2000 and 2005, as well as reducing it's poverty from 1992's 56% to 31% in 2006, even if the poverty levels are high in rural areas, even in the light of the raw per capita income, growth income mostly harvested by the wealthy and eroding the culture of Uganda. Also, on paper the liberalisation of trade in Uganda would seem as a good idea, the Ugandan economy was faced with the hostility of the global market, where its goods where undercut everywhere because of different tariffs and subsidies, notably in the EU with its Common Agricultural Policy. And even when the blocks like the EU decided to limit their tariffs and subsidies, the economies of the LEDCs were still in the position where they were essentially exploited by the “northern” economies, leading to a belief that instead of opening up, LEDCs should follow the road of Asian tigers and improve their economies by strong State intervention instead of liberalisation.

While there is multiple ways to support the development of LEDCs and improve the quality of life in them, like cutting debts, bringing aid, improving trade and performing structuring adjustments, their results are very limited on the economical aspect because of the lack of cooperation from the North, who insists on bunkering down in their own blocks and eating the ones who want to come in.

The major causes of underdevelopment concentrate around demographical and economical aspects, however interventions to fix issues in these domains have relatively limited impact: efforts to improve the basic life conditions of the population pass without problems, but when it comes to fixing the economy of LEDCs, it seems that below the blanked of money that the economical north throws at LEDCs there's a small paper with a note: “Now we own you and your resources”.