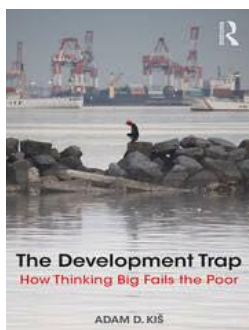


BOOK REVIEW



Adam D. Kis:

***The Development
Trap: How Thinking
Big Fails the Poor***

March 2019

ISBN 978-1-1385-7454-0

Sri Lanka Journal of
Economic Research
Volume 13(1) December 2025
SLJER 13.01.B: pp. 111-114
Sri Lanka Forum of
University Economists
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljerv13i1.256>



W M Semasinghe

*Department of Economics,
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
Email: sema23@kln.ac.lk*



THE BASIC PREMISE OF THE BOOK

The first message in Kis' book *The Development Trap* is that big thoughts on development work don't systematically consider poverty. He says that the strength of the vision, of such large, global projects or “power conditioning”, does not make them successful. Instead, what is recommended is a neutral path: limiting the most advanced thoughts pertaining to poverty alleviation and achieving realistic progress through practical, broad or small-scale work.

The book is structured into two main sections. The first section, “*The Case Against Poverty Eradication*,” seeks to demonstrate that poverty cannot be effectively addressed through grand, idealistic development paradigms. Through chapters such as “*The Development Delusion*,” “*Semantics*,” “*Culture*,” “*Confounders*,” and “*The Perversion of Idealism*,” the author argues that poverty is deeply persistent and that large-scale, vision-driven approaches offer limited practical value for poverty alleviation.

The second section, “*The Case for Continued Engagement in Fighting Poverty*,” maintains that development efforts should not be abandoned despite these limitations. Instead, through discussions in chapters such as “*Fighting the Good Fight*” and “*The Pursuit of Happiness*,” the author calls for a reorientation of development practice toward more modest and attainable objectives, as articulated in “*The Ends of Poverty*.” This section emphasises that meaningful and sustainable improvements can be achieved through practical interventions, including child nutrition programs, access to education and skills development, and the application of targeted behavioural “nudges” aimed at influencing fundamental human behaviours.

The book is made up of two sections. The first part, “The Case Against Poverty Eradication”, aims to convince the reader that studies such as “The Development Delusion”, “Semantics”, “Culture”, “Confounders”, and “The Perversion of Idealism” reveal that poverty is completely deeply persistent and resistant to simple or universal solutions and “big vision is not useful for poverty alleviation. In the next section, “The Case for Continued Engagement in Fighting Poverty”, he argues that development is not the goal to give up. But “Fighting the Good Fight” and “The Pursuit of Happiness” should refocus on such monetary chapters as “The Ends of Poverty,” which emphasise realistic, incremental, and achievable approaches to poverty reduction. The content in the section suggests that true and thoughtful changes can be made by feeding children, providing education and skill development, or by performing “nudges” to basic behaviours such as encouraging healthier choices, improving participation in education, and promoting simple actions that enhance individual and community well-being.

STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

There is also a special focus on culture. While cultural relations, such as the idea of “limited goods” in certain societies (the idea that chemical resources are limited), are seen as obstacles for foreign development programs, the author highlights the ways in which they represent culturally suitable strategies for local life. In the chapter “The Perversion of Idealism”, a controversial idea is presented - that those who operate with development funds are ultimately more responsible to their donors (contributors) than their beneficiaries (profit recipients). As a result, the projects are being worked on without considering the needs of the true intended beneficiaries. According to reviewers, the main message from Kis is to focus on programs that are small, realistic, and bring about lasting change. Instead, the aim of universal, large-scale transformation is unrealistic

ORGANISATION AND THEMES OF THE BOOK

The Development Trap is a book that analyses the problematic economic development path. The basic idea here is that the “Thinking Big” concept – big development plans, big projects, national-level strategies – fails to solve the real problems of the poor.

The book is divided into several chapters.

- A. **Initial study** – concept of development, its history and problems related to ‘thinking big’.
- B. **Large-Scale Projects and Associated Failures** – including extensive groundwork, urban development initiatives, national-level projects, and the additional burdens arising from loan financing.
- C. **Micro level solutions** – Rural level innovation, work created by private and Community groups.

- D. **Economic-political impacts** – Foreign aid, international institutions, decisions of government representatives.
- E. **Proposals for the future** – options based on the evaluation, experience, knowledge and local skills of poor people.

Throughout the book, the author argues that the most effective strategies for addressing poverty are not ambitious, large-scale goals, but rather practical, actionable, and cost-effective interventions

MAIN THEMES

- A. **Thinking big vs. thinking small** – Mega development projects are generally removed from the poor. Grassroots-level strategies (farm agriculture, basic education projects) are more successful.
- B. **Debt trap (debt wallet)** – Foreign loans for big projects make poor countries more helpless.
- C. **Local Knowledge** – the knowledge, experience, social networks, and cultural practices of rural communities are crucial for designing effective, context-sensitive, and sustainable development interventions.
- D. **Inequality** – big projects sometimes bring more benefits to the richer segments of society.
- E. **Practical development** – development is not about numbers and construction, but about improving the quality of people's lives.
- F. **Sustainability** – successful development methods should be ethical, environmentally sustainable, and conducive to future generations.

STRONG ASPECTS OF THE BOOK

- i. **The Most Balanced Perspective** – In *The Development Trap*, opinions on poverty are often polarised: some argue that poverty can be completely eradicated, while others claim that development efforts are futile. Kis contends that both extremes are misleading, and that a balanced, moderate approach—recognising practical limitations while pursuing achievable progress—represents the most realistic path forward.
- ii. **International experience and human knowledge** – The author visited different countries, experienced local life with local communities, and brings these experiences to the book. This is its true value.
- iii. **Strong criticism of contributing institutions and agreements** – many development projects are implemented to meet the expectations of donors, even though it may not align with the needs of the poor. This argument is presented very well.

- iv. Long-term abilities rather than short-term help – the authors argue that developing human capital through education, nutrition, and skills, permanent changes can be made rather than simply providing money for food, which is a temporary solution.

WEAK SIDE AND LIMITS

- i. The book does not relate to the most popular theories – Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom or Duncan Green's How Change Happens. The author has not been able to connect his arguments with these books/ideas.
- ii. Many of Kis's recommendations, such as emphasising incremental progress, focusing on practical actions, and moderating ambitious expectations, are already reflected in development literature. He, however, draws on his own experiences to illustrate and bring these principles to life in a concrete and relatable way.
- iii. Practical measurements (metrics) are not provided – Kis argues that changes in GDP are less meaningful than increased opportunities. However, he does not give solutions on how to measure these.
- iv. Details on high-level institution/policy are limited – Kis primarily describes the people and small programs he has come across while travelling. There is not enough information about international institutions, governments, or how to reform the large donor system.

CONCLUSION

The basic lesson from reading this book is that instead of “big thought”, it is important to do “short, awesome, problem-solving work”. He shows that simple things (interventions based on improving nutrition, education, and skills) can change lives forever. But, in my opinion, the book would be more effective if there were more scholarly connections at a higher level. For instance, associating his ideas with measurements like SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Human Development Index (HDI), this book would have been convincing. Strong aspects of the book include the incorporation of lived experiences, simple stories, and strong criticisms about over-ambitious goals into the narrative. Weak aspects of the book include a lack of practical measurements, limited new concepts, and a lack of a full framework. Overall, the Development Trap can be said to give a new perspective on development with small truths and simple answers.

Adam D. Kis' book should be read by NGOs, students, and people working in the field of development. His opinion is “that we should look for simple answers, eternal answers, answers that suit the needs of travelling people”. Development is not a big thought but rather a combination of small, simple steps.