Are development theories of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s still relevant today? Discuss with reference to modernisation theory.
Modernisation theory to dependency theory, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to good governance reforms, the field of development is continually changing as ideas are critiqued, adapted and replaced. However, rarely do ideas disappear, rather they are deconstructed and some of their components become part of the next ‘big idea’. Therefore, in the 1990s when the SAPs were broadly considered to have failed and ‘good governance’ quickly rose on the World Bank’s agenda, it wasn’t the end of ‘structural adjustments’, interventions were just introduced under a different guise (Smith, 2007). The same is true of Modernisation theory, which, despite its demise in the 1970s is still prevalent today. This essay will introduce Modernisation theory before illustrating its dominance in the Madagascar Action Plan (the Madagascan Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) equivalent). Examples from other PRSPs will also be cited, along with exploring the relevance of Modernisation theory in the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals and in Arjun Appadurai’s work on ‘The Capacity to Aspire’. After establishing the relevance of Modernisation theory today, some of its criticisms will be considered, because if Modernisation theory is still relevant so are its criticisms. It’s possible that revised components of Modernisation theory are now being successfully blended together with other development ideas. However, some consider that past errors are being repeated (e.g. Easterly, 2005). Despite questions regarding its merits, because of its durability, Modernisation theory is certainly relevant today.

**Introduction to Modernisation theory**

Modernisation is the transformational process which enables traditional societies to become modern societies. Modernisation theory can be related to the theory of evolution (Harrison, 1988) and because of this, it asserts that progress is unidirectional, fundamentally good and that humanity is moving from a primitive to a more advanced state (So, 1990). Modernisation theory suggested that the modernisation process experienced by the USA and several Western European countries provided a model which could be applied to other countries to enable them to develop through modernisation (Kreutzmann, 1998). This led to a decade characterised by, according to Kreutzmann (1998:256), “the unequivocal belief in solving problems of underdevelopment by applying growth-oriented strategies.” Therefore, at the heart of Modernisation theory is the idea that economic growth can be stimulated in any country, by following a US/European model.
Are development theories of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s still relevant today? Discuss with reference to modernisation theory.

In 1960s, W.W. Rostow, provided Modernisation theory with a core text, “The Stages of Economic Growth.” In it he asserted that it is possible to locate all countries, in terms of their economies, at one of the five stages shown in Figure 1. Development occurred when societies moved beyond the ‘traditional society’ through the introduction of ideas of modern science, the encouragement of entrepreneurship, and initial spending on infrastructure (Rostow, 1960). At this stage the pace of change is limited, because, according to Rostow (1960:7) the society “is mainly characterized by traditional low-productivity methods, by the old social structure and values, and by the regionally based political institutions...” Eventually, the obstacles to growth would be overcome and economic ‘take-off’ would occur. Characteristics of this stage include dramatic technological developments in both industry and agriculture, and significant increases in investment. As new industries are birthed and profits follow, additional money can be invested in developing these industries, resulting in many jobs being created. Due to decreasing numbers involved in farming and an increasing urban population, developments in agriculture, in terms of changing methods leading to increasing yields, were considered essential in order for transformation to be sustainable (Rostow, 1960). Progressing along Rostow’s stages, required several factors, especially when entering the ‘take off’ stage. This is a subject that Paul Rosenstein-Rodan had already written about in 1943 when he suggested that large-scale external investment is critical is initiating economic growth (Rosenstein-Rodan, 2005). He was joined by others who suggested that ‘poverty traps’ had to be overcome if economic growth was to occur, requiring a massive programme of investment (Hettne, 1990). Their ideas are now collectively referred to as the ‘big push’ (Easterly, 2005) which claims that a few single investments are never going to initiate growth and therefore a strategic, large-scale investment plan is required.

By the late 1960s attempts at Modernisation hadn’t delivered the envisaged economic growth (Kreutzmann, 1999). According to Kreytzmaan (1999) it was Huntington that introduced arguments that saved Modernisation theory. Huntington argued that although developing countries had many
shortages, what they needed more than food, education and health was an “effective, authoritative, legitimate government.” (Huntingdon, 1968:60). Although Huntingdon’s ideas were considerably different from the ‘good governance agenda’ of today (for example, he promoted centralised government (Huntingdon, 1968), while today's governance reforms encourage decentralisation (World Bank, 1992)), it is interesting how development practice in both the 1960s and 1990s progressed from focusing on economics onto considering how effectiveness in the political arena is essential for growth.

Modernisation theory wasn’t just interested in the economic and politics. Rostow (1960) emphasised that social factors are also significant in stimulating economic growth and explained that “most profound economic changes are viewed as the consequence of non-economic human motives and aspirations.” (Rostow, 1960:2) Therefore, Modernisation literature discusses a wide variety of ideas suggesting changes that societies need to embrace if they are to make the transition from traditional to modern in terms of their attitudes, values and expectations (Huntington, 1971). Smelser (1964) and Rostow (1971) both explained how the role and structure of families had to change, with the family unit no longer being primarily responsible for functions such as production, education and welfare.

Psychological factors were also explored with McClelland (1961) suggesting that there has to be a high ‘need for achievement’ within a society in order for it to achieve modernisation. While, the emphasis of Modernisation theory is stimulating and maintaining economic growth, in terms of removing the obstacles that impede that growth, there is a broad literature that explores non-economical factors including the political, sociological and psychological.

Modernisation theory and the Madagascar Action Plan

Having introduced Modernisation theory I will now illustrate it’s prominence within the Madagascar Action Plan (MAP). In his introduction, Madagascar’s President explains that the country has “embarked on the path of transformation”, and the MAP will help them to “accelerate and better coordinate the development process and make a quantum leap” and “ignite rapid growth” as well as facilitating poverty reduction and enable the country to take its place in the global economy (MAP, 2006:3). Not only is the language reminiscent of that of Modernisation theory, throughout the plan there is evidence that the Madagascan government is seeking to initiate a ‘big-push’, financed by tax reforms, external investment and foreign aid, in order to establish the conditions for ‘take-off’. The plan includes the development of
health and education to ensure citizens will be “economically and socially productive.” (MAP, 2006:6). It also includes the development of roads, power and airports, which are seen as “critical to support business.” (MAP, 2006:6) Then, much emphasis is placed on creating an ideal environment for businesses, and enhancing technology in order to raise business productivity (MAP, 2006). Alongside all of this, a ‘green revolution’ is planned. This, also a key feature of Modernisation theory, will involve the modernisation of farming techniques to ensure the growing urban population can be fed.

The Madagascan government are seeking to remove all obstacles to development and just like with Modernisation theory 40 years ago, this involves addressing non-economic barriers. Therefore MAP introduces a range of governance reforms, and although these often differ from Huntington’s recommendations, some of the same principles apply – economic growth requires an effective political arena. The plan also calls on the Malagasy people to embrace change and explains that to, “achieve our goals some of our values, habits, practices and priorities will need to change.” (MAP, 2006:18) In fact, although it states that maintaining and protecting elements of their culture is important, it says that, “some aspects of our traditions and beliefs must be modified or even discarded.” (MAP, 2006:19) Madagascar provides us with evidence that components of Modernisation theory are still active in development thinking.

Modernisation theory is also visible in the PRSPs of other Sub-Saharan African countries as. The PRSPs of Ethiopia (2002), Mali (2006), Malawi (2006) and Mozambique (2006) all focus on overcoming internal obstacles to economic growth. They propose agricultural developments, improved infrastructure and education, and political reforms to ensure that favourable business environments are created to help the expansion of local businesses and attract external investment. These countries all seem to be seeking the conditions for ‘take-off’. Non-economic barriers are also mentioned. All four countries speak of the importance of removing harmful traditional practices and values, while Mozambique makes particular reference to promoting “self-esteem in the minds of the citizens” (RM, 2006:32).

**Modernisation theory and the MDGs**

The focal point for all the PRSPs mentioned above is the Millenniums Development Goals (MDGs) (see Appendix 1). The MDGs illustrate how the development agenda has changed since the birth of
Are development theories of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s still relevant today? Discuss with reference to modernisation theory.

Modernisation theory. Then, the focus was firmly on economic growth and the main indicator of development was a country’s GDP. Today, the idea of human development is embodied by the MDGs and the Human Development Index, which takes into account a variety of indicators including life expectancy and adult literacy rate (UNDP, 2006), is a key development indicator. However, despite significant shifts, there’s evidence to suggest that when it comes to achieving the MDGs, ideas within Modernisation theory are re-emerging. In 2005, a report by the United Nations Millennium Project uses both the terms ‘poverty traps’ and ‘big-push’. Easterly (2005:6) in a critique of this situation explains that the Millennium Project, “argues that it is the poverty trap rather than bad government that explains poor growth of low income countries and failure to make progress towards the MDGs.” This idea, if it sweeps across the development community is highly significant, after nearly two decades of ‘good governance’ reforms are we now returning to the Modernisation theory of the 1950s? The relevance of Modernisation theory becomes even more apparent when solutions for the ‘poverty trap’ are suggested:

“...a big push of basic investments between now and 2015 in public administrations, human capital (nutrition, health, education), and key infrastructure (roads, electricity, ports...).” (UNMP, 2005:19)

According to Easterly (2005) the MDGs initiative is saturated with ideas from Modernisation theory. International leaders are calling for a ‘big-push’ in donor aid, national and centrally coordinated plans seem to be taking precedence over grass-root projects, and he suggests that Jeffery Sachs’ (Director the UN’s Millennium Project) book, “The End of Poverty” is a modern day version of Rostow’s “The Stages of Economic Growth.” In it, Sachs suggests that a ‘big push’ now would help countries escape the poverty trap, achieve the MDGs and lead to self sustaining growth by 2025 (Sachs, 2005). This is extremely similar to the Modernisation theory of the 1950s and is yet more evidence of its relevance today.

**Modernisation theory and the Capacity to Aspire**

The final section of evidence to illustrate the relevance of Modernisation theory today is taken from a piece of academic writing by Arjun Appadurai entitled ‘The Capacity to Aspire’. Appadurai (2004) explains that culture should not just be seen as being about the past and therefore considered an
obstacle for development. He urges for the future to be included when culture is discussed and explains that considering what a culture could become is as important as considering tradition. This future orientated approach of imagining a better future and overcoming cultural obstacles to development is reminiscent of the psychological ideas within Modernisation theory. Appadurai refers to a ‘culture of poverty’, an idea not dissimilar to Modernisation theory’s ‘poverty trap’. He explains that poor people often “have a deep ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live” and cites the example of ‘untouchables’ in India who become compliant rather than ‘secret revolutionaries’ (Appadurai, 2004:65). He then explains how important it is for all people to have aspirations and be able to engage in their own futures. Having already suggested that the ‘capacity to aspire’ is less prevalent amongst the poor he concludes his writing by emphasising that it’s essential that the poor are strengthened in ‘capacity to aspire’ to ensure development (Appadurai, 2004). In his work on the ‘capacity to aspire’ Appadurai provides a current exploration of issues similar to those explored by McClelland (1961) in his work on the ‘need for achievement’, drawing many comparable conclusions. For example, both discuss the imbalanced distribution of their respective terms within societies, concluding that the lack of the ‘capacity to aspire’ and ‘need for achievement’ amongst the poor creates an obstacle for development. Appadurai work provides further evidence that the ideas of Modernisation theory still relevant.

The criticisms of Modernisation theory

Given its resurgence, it’s not only Modernisation theory that is relevant, but also its criticisms. It is therefore necessary to evaluate why Modernisation theory was widely discredited in the 1970s and consider whether this revisited version of Modernisation theory has been modified enough to avoid a second round of failures.

A key criticism of Rostow’s work was its failure to emphasise that developing countries are politically and economically diverse (Haynes, 2008). As Modernisation theory is being revisited, diversity is apparent, but there might not be enough of it. The World Bank and the IMF claim that the current PRSPs are tailor-made, country-led and take unique circumstances into account (IMF/WB, 2005). In some respects this appears to be true. For example, the Ethiopian PRSP (2002) focuses significantly more on developing internal businesses while Madagascar’s (2006) contains more on attracting foreign
business investment. This indicates that although each strategy is seeking to facilitate economic ‘take-off’ the countries situation influences the exact manner in which this is planned. However, a cursory reading of many PRSPs will reveal many similarities and raise questions concerning diversity and contextualisation. Therefore, it is dubious how much has changed since the 1950s.

Another key criticism of Modernisation theory was the dichotomy between the ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ and its resulting treatment of cultural issues (Haynes, 2008). Inglehart (1997) suggests that Modernisation theory is now less deterministic and as it absorbs post-modern ideas, cultural diversity and aspects of tradition are seen as beneficial, rather than obstacles to development. This idea is evidenced in Madagascar’s Action Plan as it draws a distinction between aspects of culture that need protecting and those values that need modifying or even discarding (MAP, 2006). Therefore, perhaps ‘revisited Modernisation’ will treat tradition with less contempt and celebrate diversity, while still striving to modernise societies in order to achieve its development objectives.

As the relevance of Modernisation theory today is considered it cannot be ignored that it was discredited in the 1970s because it did not achieve what it promised. Therefore, Easterly (2005) expresses concern at the use of Modernisation ideas in achieving the MDGs. He explains that the evidence to support the case that foreign aid and coordinated infrastructure investment will enable economic ‘take-off’ is lacking. However, before discrediting the current methodology it needs to be noted that there are significant differences between the situations then and the ones today. I would argue that ‘revisited modernisation’ and almost two decades of governance reforms could complement each other effectively. The failure of earlier ‘big-pushes’ could have been a result, in part, of ‘bad governance’”, for example, corruption and ineffective legal systems. However, improvements in these areas might mean that countries are now ready for a ‘big-push’ to facilitate ‘take-off’.

During the 1960s the biggest critique of Modernisation theory came from Dependency theory, as the latter gained momentum, the former diminished (Haynes 2008). Dependency theory suggested that it was because of the developed world and it’s exploitation of developing countries that caused them to remain underdeveloped. It therefore proposed that external barriers were the main obstacles for development, not the internal ones Modernisation theory suggested. Developing countries were
therefore encouraged to detach themselves from the global capitalist system and “self-sufficient and inward-orientated policies” were suggested instead (Haynes, 2008:26). Given the present extent of globalisation, the critique offered of Modernisation theory by the Dependency school, is particularly poignant. Madagascar for example, in its drive for modernisation expresses its desire to become competitive in the global economy (MAP, 2006). This could be successful, as illustrated by some of the Asian success stories (Stiglitz, 2006). However, it could hinder their development as it will potentially open them up to the vulnerabilities of the global market. Therefore, as the ideas of Modernisation theory become more prominent within PRSPs, more attention should be given to their criticisms, many of which are offered by Dependency theory. In the past, both these theories were rejected, but, as at least one of them re-emerges, both should be revisited in order to discover what relevance their vastly different approaches offer today’s development initiatives.

**Conclusion**

Modernisation theory is evident today in the PRSPs of several countries, it has gained popularity within the international community and its ideas are being revisited in academic writing. A brief look at some of the main criticisms of Modernisation theory reveal that in some ways ‘revisited Modernisation theory’ may avoid some of the pitfalls of the classical version. However, there is a risk that past failures may be repeated. In time, evidence will reveal whether this round of ‘big-pushes’ will initiate the desired ‘take-off’ leading to economic growth and poverty reduction. In the meantime, as the global community seeks to achieve the MDGs by 2015, much attention needs to be given to the criticism of Modernisation theory to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated. I believe that a synergised approach that draws on appropriate components of Modernisation theory and the ‘good governance’ agenda (for example), could prove successful. This approach benefits from literature such as Appadurai’s (2004) ‘The Capacity to Aspire’, which adds breadth to the discussion and effectively grounds the discourse in the realities of people’s everyday lives. However, theory must always be applied to each countries specific context and currently the PRSPs do not seem to be contextualised enough.
Appendix 1: The Millennium Development Goals

**Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**
- Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than $1 a day.
- Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

**Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education**
- Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary school.

**Goal 3: Promote gender and equality and empower women**
- Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

**Goal 4: Reduce child mortality**
- Target 5: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

**Goal 5: Improve maternal health**
- Target 6: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

**Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases**
- Target 7: Have halted by 2015 and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Target 8: Have halted by 2015 and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

**Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability**
- Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources.
- Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

**Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development**
- Target 12: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.
- Target 13: Address the special needs of the Least Developed Countries.
- Target 14: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing states.
- Target 15: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing counties through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term.
- Target 16: In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth.
- Target 17: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries.
- Target 18: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications technologies.

(UNMP, 2005: xiv-xv)
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UN Millennium Project, 2005: Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals. New York, UNDP.

Bibliography (continued)

The following Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers were also used:


