

# Development, Research and Change

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## **1 Introduction**

When I first received the invitation to speak at the IDS fortieth anniversary conference, I wondered what I would say. I am not an academic, nor does my organisation – Focus on the Global South (‘Focus’ for short) – engage in academic research. I would call myself an ‘activist researcher’ and the main focus of my research is to make sense of the nature and impact of development policy and practice for those most affected by them. So I decided to share some of the key issues and questions that I, and scores of other researchers like me, struggle with in our attempts to make academic work more activist, and to ensure that activism is informed by well-grounded and accurate research.

The many questions I will raise here about development and development research will reflect issues that were raised in the Roundtables and summarised in Lawrence Haddad’s overview:

- The importance of listening to perspectives from around the world
- Knowledge is local
- Research needs to be multi-sited, with a 360 degree perspective.

Development research, like development itself, is rarely neutral. Researchers and academics tend to be located in particular cultural, social, political and geographic sites that both shape and are shaped by the material conditions under which research is produced and disseminated. Nor are the theories and discourses that emerge from development research ‘disinterested’ bodies of knowledge. On the contrary, they speak both *from* and *to* specific positions of class and power; they reconstruct and re-present events, phenomena and life conditions in forms that are consistent with the values and interests of those who produce and shape these discourses.

In the interests of full transparency, let me make clear the ‘site’ in which I locate myself. Focus is a

policy research organisation that is part of a growing, broad-based movement and political initiative to halt the excesses of global capitalism. Many – especially in the mainstream media – call this the ‘anti-globalisation movement’. However, I think it would be more accurate to describe it as a movement for ‘counter-hegemonic’ globalisation. This movement is made up of a variety of actors: peoples’ movements, citizens’ groups, civil society organisations (CSOs), trade unions, and other representative groups (such as organisations of women, farmers, workers, fishers, indigenous people and migrants), academics, researchers, legislators and even government officials.

What all of us in this diverse movement have in common is that we are committed to resisting the inequality and losses produced on a local, national and global scale by the present hegemonic, neoliberal form of globalisation and the development paradigm that serves as its frame of reference. This is a development paradigm that is increasingly dominated by global capitalism and fuelled by the corporate search for profits. My own research, and that of my colleagues in Focus, aims to investigate and publicise the impacts of this type of globalisation and to make the case for the urgency (and possibility) of alternatives to this hegemonic form of globalisation.

## **2 An overview of some important issues**

First, let me present some of the issues and trends that I see as particularly pertinent to our debates on development and development research.

A great deal of contemporary writing equates development with globalisation. But what is commonly referred to as globalisation is not an inclusive and progressive form of internationalism. Rather, it is the successful globalisation (hence its hegemonic nature) of particular localisms of social, economic and political organisation, which are neoliberal and capitalist in character. At the same time, all global conditions have local roots, and the

study of a global trend has to simultaneously examine the local particularities from which it arises. For example, statistics on global unemployment will not help us to understand why people are unemployed and what the development establishment can do about it until we examine the economic, social and political structures that dominate employment conditions. The same is true for other major trends such as migration, income inequality, the recurrence of communicable diseases, and so on.

Over the past 15–20 years, the market economy has expanded rapidly on many fronts and through multiple channels, through the actions of the state, multilateral institutions, CSOs, regional and international trade and investment agreements, etc. Our societies are, some slowly but all surely, being transformed into market societies. This has serious implications for who has a voice (or power) in society and the capacity to negotiate social, economic and political contracts.

Multinational corporations (MNCs) have gained unprecedented power over the past few decades and are the main driving force behind this hegemonic, neoliberal globalisation. MNCs are national corporations that mobilise their country's economic and political power, authority and, at times even diplomacy, to secure and further their own interests. Some examples of this are corporations involved in oil, energy and water. At the same time, MNCs also give global endeavours national roots. For example, many international banks and companies, such as Nestlé, Procter and Gamble, Wall's and especially agribusiness, have bought up local companies, tied local or national employment to the success of their products and services, and now completely dominate local and national consumer markets in a large number of countries.

Ironically, the same forces and institutions that promote global capitalism also promote democracy and human rights. I say 'ironically', because capitalism – especially in its virulent global form – cannot survive in an ethical climate that promotes genuine democracy and fundamental human rights. Corporations – which serve as the engines of capitalism – are bound by clear imperatives: making profits and expanding the bottom-line for their shareholders (who generally do not include workers or farmers, indigenous communities, the urban poor and even lower middle-class families). But in order to

keep expanding their profits, corporations need the sanction and structural support of nationally and internationally accepted legal, judicial and political entities that have the moral authority to exercise force through policy and other means. In other words, corporations need a neoliberal state and multilateral institutions in order to advance their interests. They need the state to act for them, to clear the ground for their entry into domestic arenas, to establish economic, financial, legal and judicial frameworks that facilitate their operations, and most importantly, to provide rational and ethical cover for capitalism. And what better avenue to normalise this mythology than by equating capitalism with development, democratic decision-making, consumer choice and legal systems that uphold the individual rights of a consuming public?

But the other side of the picture is that the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on countries of the South, and the capitulation by most countries of the North to the Washington Consensus, has seriously damaged the redistributive capacity of the state in both developed and developing countries. State-led redistribution of wealth and assets in favour of vulnerable communities and ordinary people through subsidies, public distribution systems, public health and education facilities, publicly owned utilities and essential services, and land and agrarian reform have never been considered democratic by capitalist forces despite the fact that such policy environments have existed largely in popular democratic regimes. The attack on the state's redistributive capacity by capitalist forces has resulted in transforming the state's character to one that is committed to upholding the interests of select elite entities rather than the majority of its citizens. Neoliberal, so-called 'democratic' states are both convenient and necessary for capitalism to expand its frontiers and reach.

Accompanying the expansion of the neoliberal state are a new language and discourse that shift public attention away from the need to investigate and question the above trends and towards the expedience and supposed ease of mitigation. Public policy discourse is now rife with language about safety nets, gender equity, empowerment, rights-based development, sustainable development, good governance, and so on. Language and actions that formerly represented resistance to exploitation have

been either tamed or criminalised. Feminism has been replaced by gender mainstreaming (why worry about patriarchy in a globalising world?); rights, governance and empowerment have been asserted through market and individualistic frames of reference that pose no systemic challenges; the ideals of collectivity and community are absent from the debate; and popular, locally or nationally rooted struggles for economic, social, cultural and political rights are increasingly suppressed or even outlawed (e.g. the struggles of peasants against the appropriation of their agricultural lands for industrial plantations, the struggles of workers against the privatisation of services, the struggles of indigenous peoples to protect their ancestral territories, and the struggles of the urban and rural poor against land-grabbing and evictions).

Public goods and services that were once, and should still be, within easy and equal reach of all those living within a common territory are now being offered as private goods and services accessible only to paying consumers. At the same time, in the words of the Portuguese scholar-activist Boaventura Santos, the distinction between public and private is being disfigured beyond recognition. Non-state and supra-state actors such as private corporations and multilateral organisations, often perform the political and economic functions of states, but without being subject to effective, sovereign political control.

There is an alarming increase in wars, social or ethnic conflicts and violence, development- and conflict-induced displacement and a militarisation of the economy, society and development itself, coupled with an equally alarming decrease in democratic and political space for most people. And we are witnessing a renewed subservience of former colonies (the South) to the industrialised North through contemporary international agreements such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

### **3 Development, research and change**

A question I am often asked is: what is development? I have never been able to answer this question in a manner satisfactory or credible to myself. So here I would like to raise some questions about the purpose and efficacy of development, and the role of research in shaping development practice.

For over 50 years, mainstream development discourse has defined acceptable and unacceptable

standards of life for the world's peoples. The dominant image of the post-Second World War era of development is one of social and economic transformation through the exercise of modern technology, science and intellectual and institutional expertise. But not all such transformations have resulted in progressive social and economic change. Despite the billions of dollars channelled into the development machinery, development has failed in its promise to deliver wellbeing, prosperity and advancement to the majority of the world's people. Many will argue that on the contrary it has exacerbated and entrenched the structural foundations of poverty, inequity and injustice. Although much of the world has gained in terms of better living conditions, the economic prosperity of some has left disproportionately large numbers – especially in the South – living in dire poverty.

Today, the body of knowledge that informs development policy and practice is much larger than it was 20 years ago. And yet, the development establishment appears unable to address some of the most fundamental crises of our times. What happened? Do development planners and policymakers still not know enough to be able to address these crises? Or, is it that the knowledge base that informs development serves particular class and societal interests, where the voices of the disenfranchised remain just voices, without the political and economic clout to tilt policymaking in their favour?

Development will not lead to progressive social and economic change unless the knowledge base that informs development policy and practice is rooted in the realities of those whose names are invoked as the beneficiaries of development, i.e. poor, marginalised and disenfranchised people.

The capacity to generate information and to enshrine it in social and institutional memory as 'knowledge' is indeed a powerful one. It is also an extremely lucrative one. Today, this capacity is dominated by academics, experts, universities, think tanks and institutions of the international aid bureaucracy, which include international financial institutions, technical agencies of the United Nations and wealthy donor countries. Most powerful among these are the World Bank, and to a lesser degree the IMF and regional development banks such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which uses its

financial and institutional resources to establish dominance in knowledge production and dissemination, and thereby attempt to establish hegemony in global and regional policymaking.

There is a 'knowledge industry' in the development world that is led by the most powerful actors in the development establishment. Many research organisations, think-tanks and academic institutions serve as ancillary units to this industry, which operates as a giant 'knowledge monopoly', edging out competition from alternative perspectives, analysis or ideas. Thus, the knowledge industry has created an all-encompassing, hegemonic discourse that reacts quickly to defuse challenges to its mission, assumptions and theories.

Increasingly, development research and its accompanying discourse have become an incestuous, self-referential system of knowledge that is blind and deaf to realities outside of the world it creates. Its world is composed as a picture that reflects the preferred economic and social models of those in power, who control the discourse and benefit from it. This entails creating and sustaining regimes of truth – or falsehoods, depending on where one is situated – that are backed by research and new fields of expertise, and are 'normalised' in the popular imagination through conferences, publications, lectures and of course, through development projects and programmes. Project or programme failures are absorbed into the world of theory and models with remarkable ease, and then reproduced as newer and modified versions of the product. And too often, development researchers are complicit in the creation and perpetuation of these falsehoods.

#### **4 The fall-out of development research models**

Development theories and models are not indisputable, objective truths about the world. Rather, they are constructions of the world, which appropriate some facts and suppress others. Their applications have material effects that often reproduce the problems that they are intended to address. For example, the World Bank–IMF's poverty reduction strategies – which are another form of SAPs, disguised as development – have resulted in policy-induced poverty in every country where they have been applied.

For millions of people across the world, development's regimes of truth are based on

falsehoods that fail to recognise and respect the realities of their lives and instead, seek to reconstruct these realities through the narrow lens of neoliberal economic thought. The world has become a testing ground for development models and theories that are removed from people's day-to-day realities, with damaging results that cannot be reversed as easily or efficiently as models are applied.

In many Asian countries, higher education and research capabilities are being privatised. Except in fields such as national security, armaments and the natural sciences, governments are reducing public support for state universities and research institutions, which are then compelled to raise money through agreements with corporations and corporate universities from the North. As a result, higher education and research are increasingly being driven by external corporate interests and domestic imperatives to secure market competitiveness in fields such as biotechnology, arms manufacturing, high-end food processing, etc. Thus, national universities and research institutes are no longer constitutive components of the project of national development. The so-called 'knowledge society' that is emerging is geared more to the needs of the market than to addressing widespread problems such as hunger, poverty, unemployment and deteriorating health conditions.

Important to point out here is that there are similar North–South dynamics within development research. Research agendas in the South are increasingly dominated by Northern research institutions which have greater access to funds and policy power than Southern institutions. Also, the parameters and rules of development research as a discipline are based on Northern epistemological traditions of science and knowledge; these parameters and rules act as filters for the types of voices, information and knowledge that are permitted to enter the discipline. A more subtle and complicated North–South dynamic is that researchers in developing countries often have more in common with their counterparts in developed countries than with the poor or disenfranchised at home. By the same token, there is a South in the North, producing conditions of poverty, unemployment and disenfranchisement in the North because of capitalist development.

## 5 Making development research relevant

There are two main questions to be asked if IDS wants to reinvent development research. First: Why do you want to reinvent development research? And second: For whom do you want to reinvent development research?

But first we must ask: Do we even need development? Questions I encounter frequently in my work are:

- We certainly need progressive social, economic and political change and some forms of economic and technological progress. But is this development?
- Can development and development research contribute constructively to such change and progress?
- Or are they suited more to preserving the *status quo* and serving the elite interests that finance development and development research?

I see concrete reasons for these questions to arise. Social sciences in the North, and development theory in general, have ceased to be a source of new thinking in society. Conventional theories and methodologies are inadequate to grasp the ways in which the world and world-making are changing. Development research and discourse appear unable to offer directions for progressive change and despite repeated evidence of its failure, the dominant development model has not changed fundamentally.

For the majority of the people in the South, development is antagonistic to the project of broad-based, progressive change. To move towards social change that is meaningful for them, it is imperative that we turn our attention to that entire body of

discontinuous and dispersed knowledge that is systematically suppressed and marginalised from the dominant development discourse. If the development research establishment wants to remain relevant in the world of progressive social and political change, it needs to open itself to alternative forms of knowledge and alternative traditions by which knowledge is generated and shared. As researchers, we need to listen, observe and learn differently.

Knowledge that is seen as 'not existing' is often knowledge that is made absent, marginalised and eventually silenced by particular research traditions and practices. We need to learn how to seek out and bring this knowledge to the fore so that it enters into and challenges the dominant development discourse. In order to learn from the voices of workers, farmers, fisher families, women, children, indigenous peoples, the rural and urban poor, and those displaced by development or war, researchers have to change their research traditions and what they accept as 'empirically valid'. We need to learn how to give political power to these voices.

In sum, if development researchers are genuinely committed to challenging orthodoxy and the *status quo*, and to reinventing development research to serve progressive social, political and economic change, we must be willing to break the hegemony of the dominant development discourse. We must make firm commitments to creating alternative knowledge for alternative societies and social-economic-political relations.

The academic and research community needs to find concrete ways to engage with the real world and be accountable to it. All of us must commit to creating and expanding spaces for counter-hegemonic discourses and conversations. And of course, this is a political project, not an academic one.