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Development Discourse and Practice: Alternatives and New Directions from Postcolonial Perspectives

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Development Discourse and Practice: Alternatives and New Directions from Postcolonial Perspectives

Paul F. Donnelly and Banu Özkazanç-Pan

Introduction

Development and aid programs, such as those aimed at promoting economic growth and prosperity in ‘Third World’ nations and transition economies, often arise out of Western and neo-liberal policy ideologies and practices. These programs may, in some cases, provide useful guidelines for restructuring institutional structures and governance mechanisms in nations that have long struggled with poverty, economic instability, health crises, and social and political turmoil. However, a growing number of critical voices are raising concerns over the guiding assumptions and inclusiveness of these policies and programs in their aims to promote economic development and social well-being in non-Western nations.

Critics of international development portray it as a patriarchal form of (neo)colonialism, imperialism, racism, intervention, domination, power, and control (e.g., Burgess, 1996; Escobar, 1995; Goldsmith, 1996; Rahnema, 1997). Critiques of the ‘Westernization of the world’ (LaTouche, 1993) have come from a number of positions, including post-development theory (Nandy, 1992; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997), Foucauldian deconstruction (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995), economics (Schumacher, 1973; Sen, 2000; Stiglitz, 2003), spirituality (Srikantia and Parameshwar, 2008), and monetary theory (Rowbotham, 2007), along with the work of such authors as Perkins (2004) and Klein (2007). As Escobar (1995: 53) sees it,

[d]evelopment assumes a teleology to the extent that it proposes that the “natives” will sooner or later be reformed; at the same time, however, it reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the

premise of the 'Third World' as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European.

We join these critical perspectives by way of postcolonial frameworks to highlight some of the problematic assumptions and oversights of development programs, while offering new alternatives and directions. By doing so, we contribute to organizational theorizing in a global context, as postcolonial insights provide much needed engagement with international aid policies and programs, as well as development organizations and institutions. To accomplish this, we offer a historical perspective on development, present a critique of the policies and practices guiding many aid programs, and conclude with suggestions emanating from postcoloniality.

The 'Poverty Reduction Industry'

The large-scale international development industry emerged in the wake of World War II with the creation of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. As an idea, development often entails a teleological belief in advancement towards the kind of economy and society to be found in the 'highly-developed' West (Castles, 2001). Imbued with such a belief, international development has come to be widely criticized largely because it 'has been and still is the *Westernisation of the world*' (LaTouche, 1993: 160, emphasis in original), in so doing privileging the 'developed' to act upon and translate the realities of the 'less developed' to make them more like the West. According to Nederveen Pieterse (2000: 182),

development thinking is steeped in social engineering and the ambition to shape economies and societies, which makes it an interventionist and managerialist discipline. It involves telling other people what to do—in the name of modernisation, nation building, progress, mobilisation, sustainable development, human rights, poverty alleviation and even empowerment and participation (participatory management).

Seen thusly, international development amounts to a one-way transfer of knowledge from developed to less developed countries, imparted by an army of largely Western capacity building experts. The view that the West knows best and the Western way is the best serves to disadvantage and denigrate indigenous ways of being and doing. In essence, the less developed need rescuing because they are in a lamentable, primitive condition. Referring to what he calls 'philanthropic colonialism', Buffet (2013) notes that

[p]eople (including me) who had very little knowledge of a particular place would think that they could solve a local problem. Whether it involved farming methods, education practices, job training or business development, over and over I would hear people discuss transplanting what worked in one setting directly into another with little regard for culture, geography or societal norms, and often with unintended consequences. This top-down model of development creates dependency and impoverishes indigenous communities through eroding their capacities and esteem to develop their own solutions according to their own needs and consistent with their own cultures.

Of course, the less developed are not the ones who have defined their situation; rather, it is the West that has defined them so (Sachs, 1992). Norberg-Hodge (1992) noted that the people of Ladakh, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, never saw themselves as poverty-ridden until they were exposed to the binary paradigm of development and underdevelopment. Seeing themselves through the lens of this Western social construction, they began to see themselves as underdeveloped and, thus, in need of help. But, what if the rest got to define the problem? Might the rest define it as a problem of greed and so prescribe a dose of ‘greed alleviation’ for the West? (Osho, 2004; Parameshwar, Srikantia and Heineman-Pieper, 2009).

International development is doing the opposite of what it claims; it is exacerbating poverty, rather than reducing/eliminating it. Given the industry’s proclivity to adopt and apply corporate management knowledge and practices (Shivji, 2008), if the survival of organizations involved in international development were to be judged on achieving their goal of poverty elimination, they would have been closed down long ago given their failure. As Warah (2008: 9) observes,

the development industry is perhaps the only industry in the world where results – or the bottom line – do not determine whether or not it will survive. If results mattered, then many donor agencies and NGOs would have closed shop years ago when confronted with the fact that their work had neither reduced poverty in many countries nor had it made people living in them less dependent on aid – which, ultimately, should be the main objective.

Indeed, there is considerable irony in the West considering itself competent to prescribe how the rest of the world should develop, given the West’s record of economic mismanagement, rampant and unsustainable consumerism and materialism, etc. While ‘Albert Einstein said that you cannot solve a problem with the same mind-set that created it’, Buffet (2013) notes that ‘the charitable-

industrial complex' searches for answers with the right hand to problems created by the left. There is further considerable irony in the comfortable work spaces and lifestyles of the international development institutions and organizations when set against the much more modest surroundings and lifestyles of the people they purport to help, even more so when set against the austerity of structural adjustment programs they require, which have only served to further impoverish those they have classified as poor and in need of help. As noted by Parameshwar, Srikantia and Heineman-Pieper (2009: 11),

the contradictions of international development work can be experienced just by entering the luxurious atrium of one of the most prominent international development institutions, whose glittering walls are inscribed with sanctimonious proclamations about alleviating poverty. A five-star hotel style lobby, decorative fountains, and a basement studded with dozens of restaurants serving cuisine from all over the world is suggestive of an addiction to opulence ... The global institutional architecture that has been designed ostensibly to combat global poverty has created a wealthy "poverty reduction industry" with its own lifestyle, ideology, personnel, and methodologies.

This observation is echoed by Pawson (2008: 113) when it comes to expatriate development workers on the ground: 'From the moment a Western aid worker arrives in Africa, he or she joins the upper echelons of the social and economic hierarchy. His or her living standards are on par with the local elite – a far cry from the average African household.' As such, Pawson (2008: 116) notes, the lifestyle enjoyed by expatriate development workers is beyond the reach and dreams of most Africans. Even the local development workers are treated differently, something Pawson (2008) refers to as 'charitable apartheid': there are discrepancies between the remuneration, lifestyles and protection of expatriate and local workers.

As Parameshwar, Srikantia and Heineman-Pieper (2009: 11) see things, the Western approach to development denigrates the reality of the non-Western "Other" through treating people as objects (as opposed to persons in and of themselves), focusing on scarcity-based problem solving (as opposed to an abundance-based appreciative valuing), privileging the prescriptions of Western experts (as opposed to valuing organic, grassroots-based, indigenous approaches), and asserting a need to have so as to be able to do in order to be (as opposed to recognizing and cultivating 'being' as the source of human possibility).

Participatory Development: A New Orthodoxy?

The roots of participatory development can be traced back to the 1970s (Cornwall, 2002), when it emerged as an alternative to mainstream top-down development (Mohan, 2008). Contu and Girei (2014) trace its consolidation at the highest institutional levels to the emergence of partnership as a key term in the World Bank's *Partnership for Development* documents (World Bank, 1998a, b). Declaring that 'the challenges of development ... can be tackled only through partnership' (World Bank, 1998a: 1) meant governments and people 'must be in the driver's seat' (World Bank, 1998a: 1, 3) of their own development. This signaled a move away from the Washington Consensus, which imposed structural adjustment programs on recipient countries in return for loans in the 1980s and 1990s, to a post-Washington Consensus with recipient governments and communities in the driver's seat:

Stakeholder participation in the design and implementation of the programs and projects is an important feature of ownership, as such, an additional key to increasing development effectiveness. Those affected by the provision of aid need not only to be consulted. They also need to be part of the decision-making on the use of the aid in a true partnership relation. (World Bank, 1998a: 8–10)

Kapoor (2005) notes that the field of international development has a reputation as a Trojan horse, which it increasingly finds difficult to shake, a reputation that shadows its latest orthodoxy, participatory development. At one remove, participatory development, embodied as it is in the likes of the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process, seems to be a move away from the failed top-down approach to development. With recipient governments preparing the PRSPs 'through a *country-driven* process, including broad participation that promotes *country ownership* of the strategy and its implementation' (World Bank, 2001: 1, emphasis in original), participatory development seems to offer the promise of abandoning neo-colonial tendencies, Western values, and centralized decision making in favor of a bottom-up approach that promotes empowerment of local communities and country ownership of development.

Laudable as all that sounds, however, participatory development faces criticism that the results have been disappointing to date (Thirkell-White, 2009): it reconfigures power and value systems to the point of being exclusionary, even tyrannical (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kapoor, 2002;

Mosse, 1994); it is a more advanced, yet subtle, form of neoliberalism intended to afford an old agenda both legitimation and institutional embedding (Craig and Porter, 2005; Ruekert, 2009; Weber, 2006); it is an intensification of barely modified neoliberalism (Cammack, 2009); it overlooks patriarchal structures, thereby reinforcing gender bias (Parpart, 2000); and it falls short in tackling both class inequalities and the harmful effects of macro-socioeconomic structures (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Further, Kapoor (2005) criticizes participatory development for its narcissistic samaritanism, its fantasy of consensus, its packaging and branding, its panopticism, and its conditionality.

As an approach to include the knowledge and opinions of rural communities in the planning and management of development projects and programs, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is premised on ‘the Freirian theme that poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality’ (Chambers, 1997: 106). While the approach ‘appears immaculate, founded as it is on enabling unadulterated participation’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1207), in practice, community fora are often managed by a Western convener or facilitator ‘deciding on the need for, and purpose of, the meeting; selecting whom to include/exclude on the invitation list; making up the agenda; choosing which participants speak, on what topic and for how long; and/or shaping the form and use of the meeting outputs’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1207).

Consensus is considered one of participatory development’s main objectives, with collective decision making reached following key community stakeholders having their say in light of the information available to them. Thus, the resulting action purports to be reflective of the interests and needs of the community, and not of prescription. However, ‘the quality of the consensus and the power relations involved in reaching it are crucial’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1209). Decisions could be compromised through inadequate participation, such as the community being consulted after the program goals have been set or majority voting substituting for meaningful deliberation. Kapoor (2005: 1210) notes the potential for micro-power processes to come into play through, for example, rhetorical devices (‘polemical or sensationalist arguments, technical or esoteric language, misrepresentation or over-representation of evidence, loud or aggressive speech, monopolisation of air time by a participant’) exerting undue influence on opinion or suppressing and coercing community members, or ‘experts’ being invited to meetings to sway the

community. Thus, Kapoor (2005: 1210) argues, the ‘tendency of consensus making is towards closure, and hence towards the privileging of some voices, and the simplification, suppression and exclusion of others.’

When it comes to institutional arrangements, Kapoor (2005) notes that participatory development must adhere to a range of bureaucratic demands, such as collecting statistics to fulfill reporting requirements, meeting budget deadlines, and abiding by procedures for review and approval. Participatory development thus becomes a management tool, which can be molded to suit institutional needs. Further, as a very marketable new trend, participatory development ‘turns attention away from the “old” (recurring problems, challenges), mobilizes new energy and resources, and inaugurates a “fresh” start; and so the development machine keeps turning’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1211). Given that it is amenable to being managed and marketed, argues Kapoor (2005), participatory development is attractive because it both protects and enhances institutional authority, with community empowerment a secondary consideration. In essence, then, participatory development allows communities to ‘participate’ in what remains, first and foremost, a top-down approach masking as bottom-up.

Given that participation is public, community members are exposed to the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1979): participatory development’s ‘public and panoptic character mean that power relationships are reconfigured, affecting the way people interact, information is expressed and knowledge is exchanged’ (Kapoor, 2005: 1212). This reconfiguration happens within the context of established community relations, with elites seeing and seizing opportunities to manage dissent and manufacture consent, and community members internalizing the new status quo through self-discipline. Thus, preferences and biases become misinterpreted as consensus, community will or traditional knowledge.

From a position of anathema, institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have moved to not only embrace participation, but to also make it a condition of assistance (Kapoor, 2005). Thus, to receive assistance, governments must partner with civil society organizations when developing their poverty reduction strategy. However, Mercer (2003) contends that community involvement amounts to little more than persuading community

members as to the desirability of what has already been agreed at the top. Thirkell-White (2009) notes that participation in PRSP documents constructs the poor as an interest group whose voice, which is primarily filtered through development NGOs, is limited to the creation and evaluation of national poverty strategy or in local level participatory planning processes that unfold within a framework already decided by the World Bank or IMF. Accordingly, as Kapoor (2005: 1214) observes, the ‘erstwhile top-down structural adjustment regime is thus reconfigured to the specifications of the new [participatory development] regime.’

To join these ongoing critical perspectives, we draw from postcolonial theorizing as means to further the discussion around development and aid policies. This approach is important given that the approaches undertaken by supranational institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, have hitherto resulted in unidirectional information flow in their Western neo-liberal aims to replicate development ideologies and instill institutional practices in non-Western economic, socio-cultural, and political contexts.

Postcoloniality and Knowledge Transfer: Development Policies Reconsidered

Despite differences in the analyses and methods, collectively, most postcolonial scholars address the textual and material consequences of historic and ongoing encounters between the West/ Rest in economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985, 1988, 1999). Within this context, postcolonial critique raises concerns over the constitution of knowledge on/about the non-West by demonstrating how such knowledge is based on Western modernist philosophical assumptions that can efface other ways of understanding the social world (Loomba, 2005). As such, scholars critique the production of knowledge *by the West about the non-West*, as such propositions often portray the non-West as backward and in need of Western knowledge (Said, 1978). In other words, postcoloniality brings to bear the voice of the non-West and non-Westerner in encounters between different people in the world.

While postcoloniality has recently entered the broad organization studies field as means of critique, particularly with respect to the guiding assumptions of managerialism, it remains under-utilized in the international business and management literature, despite some notable exceptions (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Frenkel, 2008; Joy and Poonamallee, 2013; Özkazanç-Pan, 2008;

Westwood, 2006). Within this vein, and in relation to the development focus of this chapter, a useful application of postcolonial perspectives is the critique of knowledge transfers in international contexts (Mir, Banerjee, and Mir, 2008; Mir and Mir, 2009).

In contrast to existing approaches to development, a postcolonial approach signals recognition of the ways in which the production of knowledge and the discourse of ‘knowledge transfer’ is already a cultural enterprise such that it involves ‘worlding the world’ (Spivak, 1990). Knowledge transfer with respect to aid and development, then, is a dialectic process and contestation over meaning, authority, and expertise between those who produce knowledge and those who are subject to it and subjects of it. That is, knowledge transfer is in itself an epistemological practice by funding institutions (e.g., World Bank) in an attempt to ‘control’ the interpretation of ideas and diffusion of business practices in different nations. Through the institutionalization of knowledge transfer as a normative practice, development programs undertaken by international aid organizations and institutions aim to sediment their role as the hegemonic knowledge centers relevant to those receiving the aid (i.e., non-Western nations and people). While this may produce effective control and coordination for donors and institutions, local and historically-grounded ideas and practices available from cultural “Others” may become silenced under these conditions. Moreover, the inability or unwillingness of development programs to recognize that people may have different interpretations of the ideas and practices being disseminated as ‘knowledge’ (see Bhabha, 1994) can lead to failures in, and resistances towards, knowledge transfer. In effect, development knowledge transfer mechanisms deployed through governance structures and adjustment policies can become colonizing towards the recipients. Beyond critique, we offer three insights that are relevant for development and aid programs emanating from postcolonial thought.

First, postcoloniality offers a historical perspective such that development programs need to be produced and implemented with consideration of the historical context in which they will be implemented. In other words, programs that may have worked in one nation are not necessarily transferable to other nations, locations, cultures, or economies. They cannot be undertaken through mimicry (Bhabha, 1994). Rather, they need to be grounded-locally, context specific, and appropriate for the economy and people in question. This is an important consideration for the

successful production and implementation of economic and social development programs, as many adjustment policies offer a one-size fits all recipe without an understanding or consideration of the realities facing people in the nation receiving development money, assistance, and aid. By understanding the specific context, including its socio-cultural, political, technological and economic dimensions, development programs can become much more effective in delivering outcomes and institutional change within nations. Yet, there is more than a historical perspective that is required to impact change that is beneficial and equitable for all.

Postcoloniality reimagines the notion of knowledge and this is key for development programs that may already be based on Western neo-liberal notions of economic success. To this end, postcolonial perspectives underscore the importance of local and culturally-appropriate practices as knowledge, rather than the imposition of institutional and organizational arrangements based on neo-liberal ideologies. Recipients of development programs would be considered knowledgeable, as much as their Western counterparts, such that their voices would be included in the policy and decision-making phases, as well as during implementation. More importantly, postcoloniality underscores the idea that imposing ideologies and practices from the West, or donors more generally, can efface and marginalize local knowledge relevant for successful social and economic development. Thus, leaving out the intended recipients from the decision making process would work to disenfranchise people and could lead to inequalities between wealthy and impoverished nations, as well as exacerbate inequalities within nations.

On this last point, postcoloniality offers a complex view of the social world such that the notion of inclusiveness and participatory development programs become complicated. One of the most important areas in development is gender. While there have been gains made in addressing the gender dimension of aid and development programs over the past three decades across a variety of lending and aid institutions (i.e., World Bank, IMF, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Development Program), outcomes for women under adjustment policies and programs still do not necessarily mean the end of gender and economic inequality. Postcoloniality brings to bear the notion that not all voices are heard or valued as equal in the conversation on development and, within this context, women's voices are rarely included. Consequently, development goals focused on economic outcomes need to be

(re)considered with a focus on gender equality and women's empowerment, as these goals yield successful returns for individuals, groups, and nations.

Conclusion

The international development rhetoric is replete with such concepts as participation and empowerment (Sachs, 1992), albeit they do not make it into practice. Indeed, the rhetoric of participatory development does not follow through in practice; rather, it sustains the hegemony of the Western way. Thus, while international development institutions and organizations recognize the value of including communities in the process, the reality of that inclusion is not as participatory or self-directed.

Appadurai (2001) has noted that the so-called poor continuously demonstrate extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness in developing novel solutions to their own problems, in so doing demonstrating greater competence than both governments at the local or national level, and international development institutions and organizations. Seeing the world as 'a global learning community in which societies find respectful ways of understanding what gives life and vitality to one another without the morally absurd, hierarchical labeling of some countries as "developed" and other countries as "developing",' Parameshwar, Srikantia and Heineman-Pieper (2009: 12) posit that it may be preferable for the poor themselves to lead poverty alleviation, such that the rich can focus on alleviating their greed.

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