

Rethinking geography, development co-operation and the african peasant

Summary: RETHINKING GEOGRAPHY, DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION AND THE AFRICAN PEASANT

Africa's poverty has urged many outsiders (NGOs, activists, scholars) to help Africa develop – despite the fact that “development” is often poorly understood. Many interventions have failed because they were based on unrealistic assumptions. Too much effort has been directed at “development as project” (a purposeful undertaking) and too little at “development as process” (something we can learn about). Many helpers – scholars among them – seem more concerned about being seen to do something, rather than about the slow and tedious struggle to try and understand the world. This has often turned out to be counter-productive. If, as geographers, we really want to co-operate for development we have, due to our discipline's holistic tradition, something better to offer: a contextual approach and more comprehensive analyses. Thereby we might improve the outcome of other agents' activities. After all, this is what we have been trained for. As activists and politicians we remain amateurs.

Keywords: *Development as project, development as process, NGOs, african peasants.*

Introduction

Contemporary Africa remains poor and apparently lacks development, despite annual GDP-growth of 5 per cent or more enjoyed for about a decade. Improvements notwithstanding, poverty, malnutrition and child mortality remain high whereas life expectancy, literacy and food self-sufficiency are low on this predominantly agrarian continent.

Many westerners – government aid agencies, international financial institutions (IFIs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and concerned academics – have made it their task to help Africa develop. In various ways they have intervened in African societies at macro as well as micro levels. After more than 50 years of development efforts, it is clear that these interventions have seldom been successful. One reason is that much policy advice remains based on unrealistic analysis and assumptions (Omamo and Farrington, 2004). This is because, in general, development is insufficiently understood. Too much effort has been directed at «development as project» (a purposeful undertaking) and too little at «development as process» (something that takes place irrespective of our aspirations). Differently expressed, more effort has been devoted to development as that which we want it to be rather than at trying to understand development in a detached way (Holmén,

2010). Whereas many westerners' engagement for development as project is admirable in itself, to base such undertakings on limited understanding of the issue has often turned out to be counter-productive.

The illusive concept of development

Until not too long ago, development was often seen as a simple «catching-up» by poor countries in their (presumed) urge to become like the West. The whole emphasis was on «development as project» and the task of rich countries was to supply what was lacking in poor countries – money, technology and know-how. For various reasons this interpretation is no longer in vogue. It is no longer self-evident that we or our societies are desirable role-models for others to mimic. In any case, only a few Asian countries did «catch-up», in no small degree because they neglected donors' advice and found their own priorities.

Development is a controversial issue. Many versions of alternative development are being proposed. A neutral definition (in my mind) of development holds that it is about systemic change, involving both *economic growth* and *structural transformation*. Some would like to add socially equitable and/or environmentally sustainable. But that has more to do with what we would



like development to be than with what it actually entails. Note that I do not wish to specify which kinds of structural changes are necessary, but without structural change it would be difficult to call it development. This also highlights that development is not always welcome, especially not when initiated or supported from outside. In all societies there are segments defending the *status quo*. Anyhow, my definition apparently is not as neutral as intended. Many radical academics and western NGOs are critical of «growth», equal it with (imposed) capitalism and would prefer no-growth development. However, with Collier (2008, p.190) we should accept that whereas «growth is not a cure-all, the lack of growth is a kill-all».

This points to the highly politicized dimension of development. It has often been asserted that there is no development as such, only political development. Hence, Hettne (1992, p. 4) found that «people tend to disagree on the meaning of development as soon as an effort to define it is made». Geographers have sometimes found it convenient to avoid the issue of development as process altogether. Some have abandoned (more or less) the study of development and instead engaged in «action research», thus trying to do (alternative) development rather than to understand it and emphasizing development as project. And post-modern geographers hold that development is a historically and socially specific process that cannot be generalized.

It may well be the case that development – as an open-ended process – does not easily lend itself to generalization, but by studying developments in various settings we may be able to learn something that is of general value; for example what makes it come about and what does not. Many academics engaged in poor countries' development belong to a certain academic discipline (*e.g.* economics, political science etcetera). They thus concentrate on specific issues but avoid complex extra-disciplinary totalities. Hence, all they can offer is a limited understanding. Geography, as an integrative discipline, offers a potential means to acquire a broader understanding of development. As pointed out by Brookfield (1977, p. ix), development «is a totality which cannot be properly understood by only looking at its parts». Hence, geographers have often stressed the importance of context (*ibidem*; Hägerstrand, 1983; Holmén, 2010; Navarra and Vallino, 2014). It seems timely to stress this tradition since «reform strategies often fail to take contextual factors into account» (Andrews, 2008, p. 171).

Development does not easily come about

Once, when I enjoyed a sabbatical at an economic research centre, a fellow visiting researcher (neo-liberal it appeared) asked what I was studying. «African development» I explained. «Oh, that is easy!», he replied. Continuing, «all they need is strong institutions and a free market». Obviously, it isn't that easy and, moreover, he was wrong on both accounts.

Inhabitants in rich countries often tend to believe that change is natural and unproblematic. We have become so accustomed to change that we often assume that change is not only natural but also that it is a permanent thing – something that «goes on all the time» (quote from one of my students) – and that it easily comes about. If change is in any sense perceived as problematic in our world, it is because we might suffer from a «future shock» (Toffler, 1970), implying that tomorrow is already here and that the wheels of change may sometimes turn too fast. But generally speaking, change is perceived as something good – it provides new fashions and consumer goods, which prevent us from getting bored.

We should, however, beware of projecting our own everyday experiences onto the world irrespective of time and place. To do so would be highly anachronistic. After all, we who are lucky enough to be among the privileged in the world, live in a historically exceptional time. Most of the time, change is slow and often not even noticeable. Most changes we observe happen within a system and are much less dramatic than those that contain a change of system. Historically, change of such a magnitude that it deserves the label «development», is rare. Only a few such radical breaks with established orders have been identified, the most important being the Neolithic, the Agrarian and the Industrial revolutions.

And people have not always appreciated change. In fact, «social systems build up defences against change like the body builds up defences against diseases» (Thurow, 1997, p. 4). All societies have institutions – formal and informal rules – which determine what can be done and what not. Institutions, thus, are not only enabling devices, primarily they constitute restrictions and normally function to render development less probable. For development to take place some kind of pressure for change will be required – however, not some simple «trigger» that has repeatedly been suggested in literature, but pressure of a certain magnitude.

The classical pressure is population growth.



Following Boserup (1965) – who studied development in pre-industrial societies (which makes her theory appropriate for contemporary Africa) – if emigration is not an option, increased population will cause food shortages. This in turn will trigger experiments in agriculture and eventually lead to enhanced productivity, which allows population to grow again until a new crisis occurs, and so on. In other words: crisis is the mother of invention. It is also crisis that weakens institutions, which makes it easier for people to wage the extraordinary. Every «step» in this sequence enhances area productivity but at the cost of reduced labour productivity *viz.* it requires more work (*i.e.* it comes at a higher price), which is one major reason why development does not easily come about at any time. When solutions are found and the crisis is over, new institutions evolve that legitimate and uphold the new system/society. It follows that it is weak(ened) rather than strong institutions that facilitate development. The Neolithic, Agrarian and Industrial revolutions were all preceded by crises (Harrison, 1992).

Other pressures can be lasting environmental degradation (Harris, 1979) or the threat of war. While war impedes growth, at least in the short run, the threat of war forces governments to become efficient tax-collectors in order to finance defence (Herbst, 1990). Collecting taxes is, however, not enough. The need to survive also pressures governments to promote innovations and enhanced economic productivity in order to increase the tax-base.

Aid on false premises

In contemporary Africa, these pressures have largely been missing. Africa is large – with 22 % of the earth's land-mass and only 12 % of its population, the continent has often been described as under-populated. In many areas emigration to sparsely populated regions is still a possibility. Most growth in agricultural production has thus been due to area-expansion, not to technological innovation. Hence, productivity remains low. The pressure from population has not been very strong.

The risk of war has been comparatively low – almost non-existent. Since de-colonization, it has been an axiom that borders in Africa must not be changed – an axiom that all concerned parties (African governments, donors, the UN etcetera) have endorsed. And inter-state conflicts have been few indeed. This has effectively eliminated

the external pressure for change that the threat of war provides. The result, as pointed out by Herbst (1990, p. 137), is that «the absence of a truly competitive state system that penalizes military weakness means that even those states that have no other prospect than long-term dependence on international aid will survive in their crippled form for the foreseeable future».

Aid, by many seen as benevolent and even as a prerequisite for development (as project), can actually constitute an obstacle to development (as process) – at least when it takes a permanent presence. This is so for various reasons. Aid, at least on a larger scale, causes the «Dutch disease» and makes exports uncompetitive (Collier, 2008). Primarily, aid given to governments as budget support (presently in vogue among donors) constitutes a major incentive distortion. It provides governments an artificial life-line that makes them relatively independent from the fortunes or misfortunes of the «national» economy. Hence, it reduces (or even eliminates) the pressure for change on governments – and in this sense can be counter-productive. Instead, like resource-rents, aid invites patronage (Collier, 2008) and fosters corruption, rent-seeking and bad governance (Moyo, 2010). Aid, thus, at the very least, is part of the problem.

Nevertheless, it is commonplace today to blame lack of development in Africa on bad and selfish leadership, on corruption and lack of democracy. Such critique is superficial at best and usually misses the point. It tends to criticize symptoms rather than causes. What is foremost missing in Africa today are sufficiently strong pressures for change. And benign assistance from the outside world has further reduced such incentives.

Meanwhile it appears that institutions in Africa remain fairly strong – at least in its rural areas where the majority of population ekes out a living as semi-subsistence oriented smallholder farmers. Infrastructures and markets are rudimentarily developed and area-expansion has so far been the most common means to respond to population growth. In the countryside people can live relatively undisturbed by central governments who often only control part of the national territory and seldom reach out in an effective way. In such environment, family, clan, tribe and religious belonging rather than class or nation remain the prime social identifications. Social and economic life is in large degree governed by an «economy of affection» which contains important elements of reciprocity but seldom is egalitarian (Hydén 1983). Hoarding is condemned. Poverty



and tradition underpin various forms of risk-and wealth-sharing mechanisms and it is often difficult – even dangerous (Golooba-Mutebi, 2005) – to try to break away on individual wealth-seeking (Platteau, 2000). Patrimonial and neo-patrimonial social structures dominate and the so-called «democracy of consensus», which is sometimes believed to govern life in African communities, rather constitutes a «democracy of the lords and the chiefs» (Mana, 1995, p. 24). Again, this is not to say that the situation is static. It is not. But it does imply that development – economic growth and structural change – is less easily accomplished than many want to believe.

Development always has a price. If successful, it entails short-term pains for long-term gains. During the transitory process, the existing order will be in flux, established ways of doing things will become obsolete, social relations will be altered and life-styles changed. Existence becomes unpredictable. Thus, while in the long run development may be generally beneficial, in the short run there will be losers as well as winners. It is, however, not self-evident that local elites are the most hostile to development (on the presumption that they have most to lose from change). Often, the opposite is the truth. Patron-client systems (common in Africa), while being unequal and exploitative, do offer some degree of social protection to the clients who therefore tend to be keen to preserve them (Verhagen 1984). It follows that it is not as easy as many political academics, NGOs and NGO supporters believe to mobilize the rural poor for social change.

Seen in this light, tales of corruption in Africa are, to some extent, misleading. Not that it doesn't exist, it certainly does. But neo-patrimonial structures and the «economy of affection» permeates society from the bottom up (rather than the opposite). The individualism that characterizes modern life fits ill with African social obligations. Politicians and public servants are expected to use office in favour of «factional interests» such as family, tribe and ethnic group. If they don't, they may be punished. To call such practice corrupt not only misses but disregards African realities. To believe that one type of (individualistic) logic easily can be grafted onto a society where a different (collectivist) logic prevails is not only unrealistic – it is plain stupid. More would be achieved if outsiders were willing to «go with the grain», *i.e.* to redirect development efforts «so that they stop working against, and start to build upon, the extant notions of moral obligation and interpersonal accountability in the region» (Kelsall, 2008, p. 1).

Impatience and its consequences

Now and then it has been suggested that what Africa needs is a «big push» (*e.g.* Rosenstein-Rodan, 1970; Collier, 2008) – a push big enough to shake societies in their foundations and therefore render change unavoidable. The problems with big push-strategies are several. If «normal» pressures for change are weak or non-existent, it is unlikely that Africa would be pushed in the right direction. In fact, it may do more harm than good. And since the outcome of a big push cannot be predicted, this is an irresponsible measure. Moreover, as a strategy, it has to be organized and implemented by someone. Since it is unlikely to be deliberately initiated from inside, the push will have to be externally imposed. To many, an externally executed big push will be totally unacceptable and can be likened to rape. A big push is an interference from above *par excellence*.

Nevertheless, since the 1980s, a big push for Africa *has* been implemented by IFIs and donors with widespread academic backing. It has not openly been called a big push but goes under the label of Structural Adjustment. Disregarding a whole lot of things, the full blame for lack of development was placed on African political leadership who was (and often still is) depicted as incompetent, corrupt, kleptocratic and essentially hostile to development.

The solution was to «roll back» the State and reduce its role in the national economy. Aid, if it was to be continued, was made conditional on privatization, decentralization, and abolishment of trade-regulations etcetera – based on the assumption that willing entrepreneurs and traders were silently hiding in the shadows, eager to start business for the benefit of all. As it turned out, there were few such latent «developers» waiting in the shadows – at least not with resources to make a difference. Moreover, the downscaling of public services has created difficulties for emerging entrepreneurs who depend on such services, especially in rural areas.

The outcome of this big push has not been (rapid) development. To the contrary, poverty has been accentuated and food crises «tripled in sub-Saharan Africa between 1980 and early 2000s» (ERD, 2009, p. 7). During the past 20 years, the number of Africans who live below the poverty line increased by more than fifty percent (Ejeta, 2010). It has also been questioned whether rolling back the State was such a good idea when nation-building remains an unfinished project (Holmén,



2010). Later, official emphasis has admitted that the State does have a role to play and «co-operation for development» now emphasizes that the reduced State should concentrate on «good governance» *viz.* rule of law, transparency, democracy, and anti-corruption policies (as if it had the power to do so).

Alternative agents - a real alternative?

Besides official aid, and concomitant with the introduction of structural adjustment, a new actor in the aid-industry, NGOs, has gained prominence as assumed development facilitator. Born out of structural adjustment, NGOs are just what the name suggests *non*-governmental. It is a negative term that merely says what NGOs are not and functions as an umbrella term for organizations of many kinds with varying origins, objectives and ways of doing things. This, however, does not mean that they necessarily embrace the logic of the market – some do but others are hostile to capitalism and some even to «modernity».

More is believed than known about NGOs. They are commonly believed to represent a different approach to development – people-centred, participatory and from «below». They are widely assumed to be more flexible, more democratic and effective than conventional donors. While sometimes true, common observations are that NGOs have no close grass-roots contacts and that projects seldom survive the external financing period. The number of NGOs, both small community-based organizations (CBOs), domestic NGOs and northern or international organizations (INGOs) has mushroomed since the 1980s, not least because donor money has been channelled to and through them. Some are created only to tap into these new financial flows.

It is important to distinguish between domestic and foreign NGOs. Spontaneously evolving domestic organizations could be a positive reaction to felt pressures. And the beneficiaries of such NGOs are usually their members whereas the beneficiaries of foreign NGOs are their clients. This distinction is further important not least because whereas domestic NGOs often are small and lack skills as well as resources and have limited impact, INGOs tend to be larger, better financed and thus have a potential to accomplish more. They often compete with each-other – for clients, influence, donor money and market shares. This has sometimes led to INGOs and externally supported NGOs crowding-out CBOs and domestic

NGOs that lack such support. This, and the circumstance that they are financially dependent on donors, reduces flexibility and leads to external agenda setting.

As pointed out by Lockwood (2005), NGOs «are no think tanks» and often lack capacity for independent analysis. Many are ideology-driven and make faulty assumptions about development and the societies in which they operate. Many are hostile to or at least sceptical about «growth» and instead of striving for structural change they emphasize «poverty reduction», which is less demanding but serves to enhance their image among their home audiences. In their common effort to realize «another development», INGOs and externally supported NGOs invariably emphasize issues such as democracy, transparency, good governance, and campaigns for, for example, corporate codes of conduct – issues highly in vogue in INGOs' home countries. In a perhaps naive aspiration, they want business and governments in host countries to be «nice».

However, much as one would like it, the are no universal rules and values or ways of doing things. To imagine that certain values and rules have universal validity and easily can be applied irrespective of context, is a fallacy. Actually, «codes of conduct may do more harm than good, because much of the academic and policy-oriented rhetoric on the topic is largely divorced from the realities faced by many developing country ... communities» (Lund-Thomsen, 2008, p. 1005). There are too many prescriptions circulated and too many attempts to transplant rules and institutions that belong to another type of society. When doing that, INGOs actually demand that their clients behave as if they lived in a society were they don't. This is not going to make their lives easier. Instead of trying to prescribe behaviour and transplant rules and institutions, INGOs must accept that poor and pre-industrial countries «need rules that are appropriate for societies at *their* level of development, that address the problems *they* face» (Collier 2008, p. 139; emphasis added).

Also, whether participatory approaches are the best means to promote development is highly dependent on the context. It is certainly not a silver bullet. Participatory approaches have «proved compatible with top-down planning» (Mosse, 2001, p. 17). Neither is democracy a silver bullet. Actually, economic growth tends to be a prerequisite for democracy rather than the other way around. And neo-patrimonialism, rent-seeking and corruption may be accentuated by



democracy. In any case, democracy and political rights do not seem to matter for «failing» states to turn-around (Collier, 2008). To the contrary, «at the early stages of development, democracy is irrelevant, and may even be harmful» (Moyo, 2010, p. 42). This is so because «democratic regimes find it difficult to push through economically beneficial legislation amid rival parties and jockeying interests» (*ibidem*) and, hence, are less likely to become developmental. This perfectly illustrates the fact that NGOs and INGOs often have

«rather unrealistic expectations – about the pace of institutional innovation in the public sector, of private sector development, of management capacity to cope with innovation and complexity, and the speed of social change at the community level» (Perret, 2004, p. 8).

While NGOs are commonly held in high esteem in rich countries, critique has lately been mounting in Africa. NGOs, and particularly INGOs, are found to be less co-operative than assumed. They are found to be weak on capacity-building (James, 2014), self-serving (Rothmeyer, 2011), acting as gate-keepers (Edigheji, 2005) and foreign bosses (Ghelleh, 2014), and representing a form of neo-colonialism (Shivji, 2006). There are exceptions, of course. But, in broad terms, the NGO-scramble for Africa does not seem to have made much difference. It does not in any significant way represent an alternative. It may even have delayed development.

Conclusion

Development is a complex process that does not easily come about. And it is insufficiently understood. Co-operation for development turns out to be less co-operative and less helpful than often imagined. Development has to come from within, it cannot be imposed from outside. Which ever direction it may take, it needs some kind of fairly strong pressure (internal and/or external) to «take off». Much effort to facilitate development appears to have softened the impact of such triggers and thereby mitigated development. Also, development agencies and practitioners like quick results that are easy to point at. In order to defend the money spent, they need to please the public in donor countries. This also means that, for all the rhetoric about co-operation, participation and local ownership that surrounds «development aid», there is a tendency for aid to reflect northern

fads and opinions more than southern priorities, needs and interpretations.

The NGO approach has not altered this. NGO activity for development is a tricky issue. There is reason for hope, but there is also reason for concern. Growing numbers of domestic NGOs can be a sign that pressures for change are working and that people collectively try to find new solutions to perceived problems. In that sense it is progressive. But with the large flows of foreign money to NGOs, many have been created too hastily and for the wrong reason. They may have very little developmental impact, if any. As for foreign NGOs, the situation is more complex and less progressive than many want to believe. On the one hand, although many claim to oppose the neo-liberal credo, they may be facilitating the rolling-back of the State in that they take over some of its welfare functions, thereby relieving it from its social obligations. On the other hand, INGOs' involvement has often led to a massive incentive distortion, to the capturing of domestic initiative and the creation of new dependencies. On many occasions, hands-off would be a better policy.

Impatience seems to be a common driving force among academics as well as donors and development practitioners. Research findings and publications suffer from an increasingly shortened best-before date. This has led to enhanced emphasis on rapid approaches (*e.g.* rapid appraisal) and the abandoning of more time consuming holistic approaches. And field workers and NGOs are under increasing stress to report activities and effects of activities that lead them to emphasise projects that may not be needed but are easily measured in quantitative terms, and to avoid the more subtle transformations that are more difficult to measure and which in any case take a longer time to realize (if at all).

It is quite clear that many academics have premature positive expectations on INGO activities in poor countries. They often seem to be guided by hope rather than by empirical evidence. In this situation, academics could eventually improve the chances for poor countries to develop *and* improve the practice of development co-operation if they devoted more time and effort to an unbiased effort to understand the complex process(es) of development. We should not let impatience and the urge to do something override our duty to improve understanding of a complex world. That is, as academics we should be more concerned with studying development as a complex process than with hurrying it up as project.



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