

Raising the veils of aid: Development and diversity

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Introduction

Development cooperation is like a journey to the horizon. The destination continuously recedes. The harder you reach out to attain the goal, the quicker it moves away out of reach. After over 50 years of development cooperation, the overall results leave much to be desired. Although progress has been made in one field or another and some indicators show positive trends, there is no denying that global inequality continues to grow. In many countries, poverty is rampant and development is difficult to descry.

These same 50 years, however, have seen two other global trends that can be recognized much more readily. One is the deterioration of the global environment and the rapid loss of biodiversity. The other is the absorption of local traditions in a process of cultural homogenization, a process through which cultural diversity loses depth.

Development, then, turns out to be very elusive and its pursuit takes place in a context of dwindling diversity. Could it be that the mechanisms we use in development cooperation are counterproductive? And could it even be that there is a flaw in the dynamics of the development process itself? These are the issues I explore in the following pages.

Poverty

Poverty reduction is the heart of development cooperation. The first of the Millennium Development Goals explicitly relates to poverty reduction and it is indeed a central objective of most development donors. Widespread poverty necessitates development cooperation and legitimates bilateral and multilateral interventions. The plight of the poor is so manifest that no further case for development cooperation needs to be made.

Yet, upon consideration, the notion of poverty is not so easy to grasp. In many cultures, the concept of poverty as a state of material deprivation does not exist. Concepts that come closest refer rather to a state of social isolation. In these cultures, social belonging is a more important motivator than material wealth. We know from anthropological literature (Gregory, 1977; Lizot, 1976; Mauss, 1925; Sahlins, 1972) that there are many societies that do not strive after growth and who associate material wealth with distribution rather than with accumulation. Production is limited not by low productivity but by a rejection of accumulation. Reciprocity in social relations rather than growth is of prime concern.

Are these societies poor? Certainly not in their own terms. Moreover, how could one possibly measure poverty in such a context? Historically, until relatively recently in most parts of the world the economy was embedded in the wider social and moral fabric of society. In many societies, the economy was not or only partly monetized. Clearly the notion of poverty in a material sense and measured in monetary terms has no meaning in such a context.

Yet in many policy documents on development, poverty in this material sense is given an almost universal significance. For example, in an important OECD/DAC document (OECD/DAC, 1995) we read the following:

In the early 1950s, when large-scale development assistance began, most people outside the developed countries lived as they had always lived, scraping by on the edge of subsistence, with little knowledge of and no voice in global or national affairs, and little expectation of more than a short life of hard work with slight reward.

The 2000/2001 World Development Report (World Bank, 2001) is even more outspoken:

Until the mid-18th century improvements in living standards worldwide were barely perceptible. Most societies were resigned to poverty as an inescapable fact of life. As late as 1820 per capita incomes were quite similar around the world...

Roughly three-quarters of the world's people lived on less than \$ 1 a day.

Foolishness! Implying that a Paleolithic hunter/gatherer lived on less than a dollar a day is clearly meaningless. But what is worse, these statements display an extreme narrowness of vision. What a dismal and reductionist picture is being painted here! Humanity's rich and diverse history in giving meaning to life, in knowing dignity and honor, in exchange and reciprocity, and in living a 'good life' is ignored as if it never existed.

Poverty is both a relative and a normative notion. One can only be poor in relation to others being wealthy. And one can only see poverty as a dismal state when wealth is seen as a state to be attained. It was only during the last few centuries that local economies, through the global spread of capitalism, were drawn into an ever widening monetary regime. Only then it became possible to compare societies or individuals in monetary terms. Only then did they start comparing themselves in those terms. The experience of scarcity spread widely (Achterhuis, 1988). In a certain sense it was only then that poverty on a global scale came about.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me be clear where I stand. I do not mean to assert that poverty is a mere chimera and that we only need to deconstruct the concept to end the confusion. Unfortunately material deprivation exists. It is real. It hurts, it smells, it degrades. We need to eradicate it.

But I wish to point out that in the very core of development thinking, we come across a concept, poverty, which all too often is used in an uncritical and unreflective way. In thus projecting poverty as the almost natural state of humanity prior to the industrial revolution, one throws a veil over the cultural heritage of humanity, hiding from view what could be critical resources for our common future. And in the same movement, with the same veil, one hides from view the more ugly aspects of development itself.

Development

Over the last few decades, we seem to have witnessed a growing international consensus among policy-makers that development is an endogenous process of social change. Development, it is explained, springs from cultural roots deep down inside each society. Each country has to find its own development path. There is no universal formula for development. Policy documents and declarations on development abound with statements of this nature. Such statements have a strong 'feel-good' content but rather distort than clarify our understanding of development. And, as I shall demonstrate, they hardly have any bearing on the practice of development cooperation.

In fact, it is through looking at the practice of development cooperation that we can quickly discern what development is really all about. President Truman's famous 1949 Inaugural Address introduced the concept of 'underdevelopment' and announced 'a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'. Ever since then, the transfer of knowledge and capital have been the central components of development cooperation and permanent factors beneath the ever changing fashions in specific approaches and development jargon. In the words of Vandemoortele (2004):

The partnership between rich and poor countries takes many forms, including foreign aid or official development assistance. In essence there are two major dimensions to that partnership: one is concerned with 'money changing hands' the other with 'ideas changing minds.

Transfer of capital takes the form of grants, concessionary loans or direct project funding. Transfer of knowledge is clothed in scholarships, technical assistance or the introduction of technologies. These are the instruments of aid.

Why do knowledge and capital play such a central role in development cooperation? The answer is surprisingly simple. It is because the accumulation of knowledge and capital are central to development itself. The twin mechanisms of knowledge and capital accumulation are the motor behind progress and the spreading of modernity. Here lies the core of the development of western societies since the early Enlightenment.

It was in the 17th and 18th centuries that capitalism became the dominant feature of the economy in Western Europe. In that period, capital accumulation became a goal in itself and institutions were created to cater for permanent accumulation independent from social preferences. With the emergence of the joint stock company, capital came to be permanently invested in the company (Dillen, 1970; Neal, 1990). The same period saw the institutionalization of knowledge production through the establishment of learned societies (Landes, 1998). Also knowledge production became a goal in itself. And on the basis of these two developments, the ideology of infinite progress acquired a dominant position.

As is well known, the motor of knowledge and capital accumulation allowed the western powers to subject the entire globe to their intellectual and economic regime. All places on earth and all peoples living there were gradually drawn into the market economy and subjected to intellectual and economic exploitation. The process has fundamentally altered relations between peoples. In the process, unprecedented wealth

has been created. But at the same time a monetary web has been cast over all peoples, bringing them together under a regime of comparative valuation and classifying them as wealthy and poor.

The ideology of progress was used to legitimize this process and even to explain it as an unavoidable natural phenomenon. During the 19th century, theories of social evolutionism explicated the necessary role of the European powers in spreading civilization. Thus colonialism and the forced introduction of cash crop production were legitimized. And in the process more wealth was accumulated.

If, then, knowledge and capital accumulation is the formula through which the developed nations have become what they are, it is not surprising that the transfer of knowledge and capital is seen as the solution for underdevelopment. Naive, maybe, but not surprising. What is surprising, by contrast, is the apparent lack of awareness in development discourse and practice of these historical roots.

Quite a number of penetrating analyses have been published, laying bare these roots (for example Crush, 1995; Girvan, 2006; Hettne, 1991; Mehmet, 1999; Rist, 1997). 'Rather than being politically neutral, in these analyses development emerges as historically rooted in colonialism and this is inextricably linked to the exercise of Northern power over the South' (Gardner, 1997). The argument is particularly strongly summarized by Rist (1997):

It is in the nature of 'development' not only to make an overabundance of goods available to consumers, but also to produce inequality and exclusion. All the texts on 'development' are unanimous in concluding that the gap between North and South (but also between rich and poor in each) is continually widening... In fact 'development' itself, far from bridging the ritually deplored gap, continues to widen it... At the end of the day, it appears that the 'struggle against poverty' is part and parcel of economic globalisation... What we have here is one more instance of an old trick: to use indisputable values in order to justify programmes or strategies which lead to the exact opposite of what they claim to achieve.

But mainstream development thinking and practice does not seem to be bothered by such critical voices. Quite the opposite: the development community in an unprecedented consensus has rallied around the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000):

We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want.

There is no inkling of the historical background of development, no hint of awareness that development may bring about unwanted side-effects, no clue that growth might be accompanied by exclusion, not to mention the destruction of biological and cultural diversity. Through this ahistoric stance, this lack of awareness of being part of a tradition, the cultural roots of development are veiled and the illusion of development as an endogenous process is created.

How can this be explained? The main factor seems to be that in the post-1945 period, more and more Third World politicians, intellectuals and policy-makers have internalized this ahistoric thinking about development. As Escobar (1995) points out,

a threshold of internationalization was crossed in which the Third World was seen and analysed in development terms. Research and knowledge to provide understanding of social and economic problems created development disciplines and sub-disciplines. Third World economies, societies and cultures were offered up as new objects of knowledge. As a consequence, 'people who were once simply the object of development now came to see and define themselves in its terms' (Crush, 1995).

Development cooperation

Now, I believe that Rist (1997) and others who have tried to deconstruct development discourse and expose it as a capitalist ploy, are overstating their case. Development discourse and development practice is not monolithic. As Gardner (1997) clearly recognizes, 'development knowledge is not one single set of ideas and assumptions... It is created and recreated by multiple agents, who often have very different understandings of their work'.

More importantly, the historical roots of development thinking and practice are diverse. Although there is a direct link with Enlightenment thinking and the practice of accumulation of knowledge and capital, there are equally clear links with other sources. Cowen and Shenton (1995) have drawn our attention to the fact that:

the modern meaning of development (imbued with an overt sense of design) emerged to confront the social disorder that accompanied the birth of industrial capitalism. This new meaning was in direct opposition to the idea of progress as a 'natural' process without intentionality.

Development discourse and practice do not only hark back to the ideas of Fontenelle, Smith and Ricardo but equally to Saint Simon, Marx and Comte. There is more than a glimmer of hope in this. Development discourse not only reflects western experience with growth and the accumulation of capital and knowledge, but equally with dealing with the unwanted side-effects of growth. More than two centuries of western experience in combating poverty and exclusion is equally brought to bear and with it the values that have come forth out of this combat, values related to human rights, democracy, equity, solidarity, public participation and so on.

There is hope because this state of affairs means that the notion of development remains open for discussion. It is conceivable that new and better ways of thinking and practicing development can be found. The so-called developed nations have not really found a solution to the dilemma's and contradictions of endless accumulation and we need conceptual space for coming up with better answers.

But there is also a risk, and that is that development remains an endogenous western phenomenon that is merely exported to other cultures. If discussions and practices concerning growth and equality, or concerning markets and governance, continue to be fueled and inspired by western experience only, then there will be a tendency to entirely fill the conceptual space with these notions and to crowd-out and silence non-western voices. In fact, I feel this is exactly what is taking place in the practice of development cooperation today.

In the current international consensus, development cooperation is seen as a partnership in which both parties agree on mutual responsibilities. Development, as mentioned, is seen as an endogenous process of social change over which recipient

governments have to take ownership. This ownership takes the form of a home-grown poverty reduction strategy based on an analysis of the specific context. In this way, it is professed, aid can become demand driven and based on local priorities. The responsibility of a donor is to align with this strategy, in harmony with other donors.

Yet, contrary to this formal discourse, in practice most donors openly admit that they are not well equipped to support long-term endogenous change processes. They need to be able to show quick results to their constituency and try to operate strategically to influence policies and programmes of the recipient governments. Many donors, rather than respecting recipient ownership, work with input objectives and tied aid conditions. In practice, recipient ownership is often restricted to a limited number of 'champions of reform', those who want the reforms the donors also wish to see. And in case there is no real demand from the recipient country for reforms, donors more often than not still push for sector reforms and a particular poverty reduction agenda. When governments prove unable to come up with strategies that meet the conditions of the international donor community, donors are more than willing to provide a helping hand. This explains why these poverty reduction strategies often look alike or take the form of a shopping list of donor wishes.

How, then, do donors go about influencing the home-grown policies of the recipient government? Well, cooperation in the context of sector-wide approaches is based on prior assessments; progress monitoring takes place on the basis of an agreed upon policy matrix; and adjustments are made through policy dialogue. Donors are never far from the steering wheel.

Policy dialogue is indeed a crucial characteristic of current development cooperation, setting the framework in which transfers of knowledge and capital take place. Good governance is generally seen as a precondition for effective poverty reduction and therefore donors feel entitled, as part of the partnership agreement, to call recipient governments to account for the quality of their governance. And sometimes donors simply bypass recipient governments and directly support organizations or movements striving for change.

What is it that donors bring to the tables of policy dialogue? It is a whole array of western values, which are nevertheless considered to be universally valid. Western concepts on the best way of organizing society, such as democracy and market economy, are deemed to be applicable to developing countries. In the social-political field this covers the *trias politica*, multi-party democracy, the notion of the responsible and politically involved citizen, equity of man and woman, separation of church and state and so on.⁶³ In the economic field it covers the free market, the state in a facilitating and regulating role, free trade and international division of tasks based on comparative advantages.

It is easy to see that there is a tension between the practice of development cooperation and the claim that development is an endogenous change process. It is equally easy to see that in the policy dialogue there is little room for considerations that spring from other sources than western theories and ideologies. As Rist (1997) observes, "development' is becoming universal, but not transcultural'.

⁶³ Sen (2006) reminds us that although these notions carry a strong modern western stamp, there are actually much older and global roots of democracy.

Yet, we should not become too pessimistic. The very fact that there is a tradition in western culture of democracy, popular participation and giving voice to the disenfranchised, implies that, in principle, room for other voices can be gained. If donors could become aware of the ethnocentric character of their thinking, some room for alternative voices could be realized by calling upon some of the very values these donors hold dear.

Knowledge

As I have indicated elsewhere (Molenaar, 2006), the transfer of capital does not automatically result in economic growth. In fact, it can have quite opposite effects. The introduction of money in a subsistence economy often undermines traditional mechanisms for exchange and reciprocity. It fuels demand for new external products and brings scarcity. And when it finds no possibilities for profitable investments, money tends to flow out, leaving in its wake impoverished communities that now depend on an external market to which they have unequal access.

Also the transfer of knowledge can have such adverse effects. Knowledge is a social construct. It is created and validated in a social context. Even the allegedly objective knowledge of the natural sciences is constructed and based on consensus. Shapin and Schaffer (1985) point out that:

In the conventions of the intellectual world we now inhabit there is no item of knowledge so solid as a matter of fact... Our theories, hypotheses, and our metaphysical systems may be jettisoned, but matters of fact stand undeniably and permanent... There is nothing so given as a matter of fact.

Yet they show that at the heart of the scientific method for establishing facts lies a social process. For knowledge to be created, and facts to be acknowledged, it is necessary for experiments to be witnessed. The birth of the experimental method in the natural sciences takes the form of the emergence of literary and social conventions for the correct way of describing and discussing experiments and validating knowledge.

It is important to realize that the knowledge thus created is public in nature but only in a restricted sense. As Shapin and Schaffer (1985) indicate, experiments take place in a restricted public place; not everybody can come in; not everybody's testimony is of equal worth; not everybody is equally able to influence the institutional consensus. Only knowledgeable people whose capability to understand the experiment can be taken for granted and people whose faithfulness in witnessing the experiment can be relied upon are allowed to play a role in validating knowledge.

Scientific knowledge, therefore, is both public and restricted. It is there for everyone to see but not for everyone to understand and certainly not for everyone to produce or validate. In fact, many rituals of academia, for example, around doctoral degrees and inaugural lectures, are a public display of exclusivity. Scientific journals play a crucial role in this game of exclusion. As Guédon (2001) points out, a scientific journal not only acts as a public register, it also brands:

being published means being accepted into some sort of restricted intellectual space through a review process that guarantees as much one's belonging to a certain kind of club as it guarantees the quality of one's work.

Peer reviews and editorial policies and preferences play a key role in deciding which knowledge will be authenticated and who will be included in the select company of the knowledgeable. 'Among scientists, those who manage to play an active editorial role in the publication process enjoy a special and rather powerful role, that of "gatekeeper"' (Guédon, 2001). And of course there is a complex hierarchy involved. Through the Science Citation *Index* and journal, impact factors, authors and journals are classified in a system of relative prestige and authority (Guédon, 2001).

Facts, objectivity and scientific knowledge, then, are socially constructed and rest upon authority. Yet, the illusion is created that things are otherwise. As Shapin and Schaffer (1985) demonstrate, the various conventions around the scientific experiment all have the purpose of objectifying what is being observed. The scientist is assigned the role of a disinterested observer who in his accounts merely mirrors nature: 'the solidity and permanence of matters of fact reside in the absence of human agency in their coming to be... the matter of fact can serve as the foundation of knowledge and secure assent insofar as it is not regarded as man-made'.

This myth of the scientist as a neutral or disinterested observer who merely analyses what is already given, hides from view that science is a social process of producing meaning and claiming authority. As Smart (2002) points out:

A predominant and taken-for-granted characteristic of modern civilisation is the differentiation and associated ranking of forms of knowledge in accordance with elaborate criteria of scientificity. The corollary of this process of differentiation and ranking is the disqualification and subjugation of those forms of knowledge deemed to be illegitimate in terms of the particular criteria of scientificity employed.

Once this is understood, it becomes immediately obvious that transfer of knowledge is not neutral and can have undesirable consequences. Transfer of knowledge through technical assistance provided by western experts is a case in point. As Crew and Harrison (1998) argue:

The division between indigenous and Western or scientific knowledge is based on ideas about people rather than on objective differences in knowledge or expertise... An 'expert' is not an equal. He or she is by definition better than non-experts in at least one respect, that is in having greater expertise. The prior definition of certain forms of knowledge as 'expertise' according to who has the knowledge, rather than because of the nature of what is known, effectively excludes a wide range of people from the central discourse.

Indeed, within the field of development cooperation a lot of 'development knowledge' is mobilized that is completely blind to and has the tendency to sweep away existing knowledges, indigenous insights and local perspectives (Mawdsley et al, 2002; Utting, 2006).

The picture is somewhat more complicated when we turn to scholarships and programmes to strengthen the capacity of institutions for research and higher education. In most developing countries, western institutions for knowledge and learning have been replicated. This means that many non-western scholars and intellectuals have internalized western scientific insights, including insights into the nature of development.

One would hope that this would allow them to relate these insights to indigenous forms of knowledge and to integrate these knowledges into new meanings and new ways of dealing with development. But this is not at all an easy or automatic process. More often than not, these scholars have equally internalized the tendency of western science to silence other forms of knowledge. They have become sensitive to the power of the core journals and centres of excellence that have the authority to authenticate knowledge. This authority creates a frame of reference from which they cannot easily distract themselves. These reasons can withhold intellectuals from trying to assimilate and integrate various knowledges and can actually have the opposite effect of causing brain drain.

Towards epistemic diversity and international dialogue

We begin to see why development is so elusive and why the target continues to slip away. The accumulation of capital and knowledge leads to unprecedented wealth and scientific insights, but also to inequality and exclusion, both socially, economically and intellectually. Transfer of capital and knowledge is not likely to be an effective counter measure as long as there are no safeguards for permanent local investment, assimilation and integration. This requires diverse and highly contextualized approaches. Unfortunately, and despite lip service to local ownership, the practice of development cooperation shows a marked lack of context sensitivity.

To benefit development, global knowledge needs to be contextualized. It needs to be applied within and adopted to a context of specific local circumstances. Then it can enter into a dialogue with indigenous perceptions and insights. Integrating global and local knowledges requires an open, inquisitive attitude and a willingness to recognize and question one's preconceptions. It implies communication with people with different backgrounds, concepts and epistemologies. It may lead to insights in which the world is not seen in terms of objectified facts and in which the observer is actually an integral part of what is being observed.

There is, I believe, a crucial role to play for non-western scientists and intellectuals. There is a need for them to carve out their own niche for intellectual activities in which they are able to access and integrate global and local knowledge. As we have seen, tapping into sources of indigenous knowledge and culture to enrich global knowledge and to find solutions for local problems is not an automatic process. But as soon as we realize that all knowledge is a social construct and that the validation of knowledge rests on authority, we begin to see that possibilities for intercultural dialogue and understanding really depend upon an act of will.

I feel that non-western scholars and scientists should be supported in carving-out such a niche. Research is needed to dynamize and harness endogenous sources of insight and initiatives. There is need for knowledge that empowers local cultures and builds on indigenous roots. This does not mean that these researchers should disconnect from the global body of knowledge and centers of excellence and authority. On the contrary, they should be encouraged to freely interact with them and have full access to the knowledge that is available there. But at the same time, they

could be empowered to contextualize such knowledge and to merge and integrate it with other contents and different epistemologies. From this encounter, new and locally relevant knowledge will emerge. For this new knowledge to grow and become robust, it requires courage and self-confidence⁶⁴ to develop home-grown epistemic communities that validate and authenticate home-grown concepts.

There have been attempts and initiatives along these lines, but rather fragmented and without much visible impact yet. But there is every reason to step up such attempts. It may open up possibilities for a better analysis and understanding of chances and conditions for pro-poor growth and poverty reduction. It may result in much better poverty reduction strategies. Consequently it may enhance local ownership of the development agenda, possibly covering alternatives to the formula of endless accumulation. One can even hope for a policy dialogue on a more equal footing.

Modernity is in crisis. By externalizing the accumulation of capital as an autonomous process and a goal in itself, we have created a situation in which the economy no longer serves culture but only itself. The economy has broken free from restraint and runs away with us, capitalizing all natural and cultural resources in the process. Meanwhile planetary natural resources are rapidly being depleted and biodiversity dwindles. Likewise, the production of knowledge has been autonomized and knowledge accumulation has become a goal in itself. It has resulted in an exploitative kind of knowledge in which the observer stands aloof and every conceivable object is opened up for intellectual exploitation. It is also an aggressive kind of knowledge in that it subjugates other forms of knowledge and reduces cultural diversity. Knowledge no longer serves wisdom but runs its own course.

The limits of this process of infinite growth are in sight. We urgently need answers on how to redomesticate knowledge and capital, how to harness their energies for the realization of cultural and spiritual values, and how to taper their energies for mindless accumulation. Some of these answers may be found in the rich and varied experience of cultures around the globe and more particularly in the so-called developing world. It is here that we still find epistemologies that are not based on a separation of subject from object, and economic mechanisms that are not based on accumulation. If such answers can indeed be found in this context, then developing countries have something extremely valuable to bring to the tables of policy dialogue. Who knows, we may even see a form of international cooperation that deserves of the word 'partnership'.

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⁶⁴ On the importance of confidence in overcoming the 'colonisation of the mind', see Sen (2006).

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