

Navigating the Development Aid Challenge: Toward a More Encompassing Framework

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This chapter examines the conceptual issues that complicate the work of development and social change, especially in the global South. Within the context of international development, the rhetoric of securing development aid tends to evoke the notion of neoliberalism as either a hegemonic/top-down or bottom-up phenomenon. At the heart of the debate is the desire to democratize the development process; that is, to make sure that people's power undergirds the enterprise through participatory and bottom-up or grassroots approaches. Although the ideal of democratizing development projects advocated by political economists may be overlooking significant pitfalls, a discursive perspective seems to point to the possibility of establishing a more encompassing perspective.

Jean-Claude Kwitonda research interests include global neoliberalism, especially its various meanings. In this chapter, he suggests a way to redefine and understand neoliberalism.

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This chapter takes into account the controversies of international aid and sensitivities that surround related concepts such as development and neoliberalism. Nevertheless, its central argument is that the divide between poststructuralists and political economists need not be deterministic. This central argument applies an unconventional theoretical lens (of neoliberalism as discourse) that merges the poststructuralist and political economist perspectives (Springer 2012). We can best understand the enterprise of foreign aid and its consequences for local beneficiaries through a dialectical process that binds bottom-up and top-down ways of thinking. In such contexts, the task of theorizing the benefits of aid is difficult: “It is one that necessarily involves reconciling the Marxian political economist perspective of hegemonic ideology with poststructuralist conceptualizations of governmentality, where policy and program along with state form approach fall somewhere in between” (Springer 2012, p. 137). Rather than its being a limitation, reconciling poststructuralist and political economist perspectives enriches our understanding of the workings of neoliberalism and its role in international development and related aid. This method of encompassing agreement does not purport to argue that those who choose either of the two perspectives are wrong or misguided. Rather, it argues that neoliberalism understood as discourse can assist in establishing a more sophisticated and inclusive framework between the two schools of thought that, in this context, may seem to be (essentially) disparate.

DICHOTOMOUS (RE)CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF DONOR AGENCIES

The role of donor agencies has had a tremendous impact on the conceptualization and reconceptualization of development and related discourse (Storey 2000). International donor agencies tend to represent top-down perceptions associated with international aid. Hence, top-down approaches tend to trigger the need for (re)conceptualizing development projects based on grassroots, bottom-up ideas (Ugboajah 1985; Sastry and Dutta 2013). Although each perspective allows us to understand the consequences of international communication, the two patterns have led to polarities in the theory and praxis of international development. As a result, the field seems to be in a conceptual crisis (Escobar 2000a, b; Storey 2000; Waisbord and Obregon 2012).

Scholars who examined the role of media in the process of economic and social development heralded the passing of traditional societies (e.g., Lerner 1958). They identified the traditional personality of people in the so-called Third World countries as a key barrier to development (Williams 2003), seeing low self-esteem, absolute values, resistance to innovations, fatalism, and non-achievement as the main psychological components of the traditional personality (Williams 2003, p. 215). To develop, people in the Third World needed “to act and think in modern, western ways” (Wilkins 2000, p. 2). That is the dominant paradigm in international development discourse.

By the 1970s, scholars—most of them from the global South—felt skeptical about the prevailing paradigm. In fact, according to Williams (2003), although funds and efforts had been invested in modernizing poorer countries, there was weak economic performance between 1960 and 1970 in newly independent countries. Most notably, scholars like Escobar (1995) denounced the Eurocentric and imperialistic outlook embedded in the ill-fated modernization enterprise. Amid these critiques and controversies, the concept of participation emerged as a bottom-up and viable response to (top-down) Western modernization.

The participatory development turn emphasizes the need for the active participation and empowerment of local communities in the articulation of their requirements and strategies for the betterment of their social and economic status (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Waters 2000). Today, advocates of culture-based and participatory approaches present this paradigm as the solution to the imperialistic, neocolonial, and neo-liberal tendencies associated with the modernization paradigm, as well as institutions perceived as perpetuating such hegemonic patterns of power (Dutta 2004; Sastry and Dutta 2013).

Nevertheless, participatory approaches are known to have contradictions. For instance, scholars of international development studies find that participatory approaches to development are not immune to power, praxis, and ideological manipulations perceived in the dominant paradigm (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Rahman 1990; Waters 2000). Waters (2000) elaborates on this critique by arguing:

Even though the new approaches may speak the language of empowerment, they do little to foster the social and political change that links local agents with higher levels of policy and decision-making. Assuming that participatory approaches are inherently more capable of generating social

transformation is questionable because we simply have not seen a systematic analysis of how local agents engage with larger power structures represented by researchers and practitioners. (p. 93)

Also, the word *empowerment* connotes the subtitling of top-down attitudes. Who is empowering whom and from where is a question that should be answered by participation scholars and practitioners. Moreover, scholars who reflect on participatory approaches have found that the approach may be beset by non-trivial pitfalls that include neoliberal tendencies (Cornwall 2007; Leal 2007; Rahman 1990; Sachs 1991; Waisbord 2008) that culture-centered approaches want to avoid. For instance, Rahman (1990) noted that “participation has become a politically attractive slogan” (p. 202), arguing in addition that “the concept of involvement is serving the private sector and its supporters in the latest drive toward the privatization of development” (p. 203). Among other things, Rahman posits that the term has become a useful fundraising device for both local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who use it to secure donor funds.

AID AND THE DIVIDE BETWEEN POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

There are valid concerns that development aid results from both local and extra-local dynamics in developing settings. For example, some scholars of African development note the lack of trust between African governments and the people at the grassroots (Ngwainmbi 2005; Rahnema 1990). For instance, Ngwainmbi (2005) points out that NGOs and major local companies “traditionally have better luck working with citizens [at] the grassroots level” (p. 307). Although the grassroots approach to development is desirable, some African case studies point to another complication, especially when international organizations are involved (Waisbord 2008). For example, referring to the case of Mozambique, Hanlon observes that governments of economically developed countries may use donations and NGOs to manipulate and advance their imperial, economic, and political agendas, or they may at least be perceived as bypassing governments to reach ordinary people directly, thereby weakening national governments. Aid in such cases has encompassing consequences regardless of whether one views it from a poststructuralist or political economist lens.

There is a similar dichotomy between the conceptualization of development and some intellectual movements such as poststructuralist and political economist perspectives. Escobar (2000a, b) provides an account of this link in his analysis of the three paradigms that have characterized the field of international development studies:

These paradigms include individual and market-based liberal theories, currently resulting in neo-liberal development approaches that seem to dominate the policy field, production-based policy Marxist theories, which provide the foundation for dependency and world systems theories in the 1960s and 1970s, and which can be seen at play today in some neo-structuralist approaches; and finally language and meaning-based poststructuralist theories, which have in recent years enabled a new type of critique of development discourse and practices. (2000, p. 166)

Escobar also proposes that to tackle other theoretical orientations, questions should be asked at both top and bottom echelons of the development enterprise to address gaps that are between what he calls *sites of practices* and *the policy level*. As a result, Escobar suggests that this gap is at the heart of the social and epistemological crisis that has plagued the field of international development studies for many years now. He argues that “unless we question the development model significantly, which has to be accomplished at the policy level, we will not be able to transcend this social and epistemological impasse” (p. 165).

As it turns out, however, development discourse continues to revolve around the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy. There is the temptation to see the conceptualization of development projects as either diffusionist (i.e., top-down) or participatory (i.e., bottom-up). As a result, scholars of development studies have been grappling with this philosophical divide and a receding theoretical convergence (e.g., Waisbord and Obregon 2012). Political economy scholars present neoliberalism as a top-down hegemonic project, serving the interests of global capitalism most of the time under the guise of philanthropy (e.g., King 2008; Sastry and Dutta 2011, 2013).

On the other hand, scholars like Lemke (2002) and Ferguson and Gupta (2012), influenced by the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, perceive neoliberalism as a bottom-up phenomenon. Due to long-standing ontological and epistemological differences between Foucauldian and Marxian understandings of power and discourse, it is quite common

to find an either/or dichotomy in studies that are influenced by either school (Springer 2012). Because of the controversial nature that characterizes grassroots development imperatives and donor agencies, as well as other differences from the poststructuralist/political economist dichotomy, the nature of international aid programs calls for a more encompassing way of understanding the difficulties and opportunities of international assistance and related discourse.

NEOLIBERALISM AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Marxian and Foucauldian perspectives are believed to be quite divergent, and this view has implications for studies involving neoliberalism. Springer (2012) creatively illustrates this divide with a rather provocative and seemingly oxymoronic title to his paper (i.e., “Neoliberalism as Discourse: Between the Foucauldian Political Economy and Marxian Post-Structuralism”), in which he argues that there is a false dichotomy in the contemporary theorizing of neoliberalism. By intentionally misplacing his adjectives—associating Foucault with political economy and Marx with poststructuralism—Springer surprises readers with the non-conformist combination.

As noted in earlier sections, a similar dichotomous way of thinking can exist in international development aid discourse. For example, political economist scholars who use Gramscian hegemonic lenses to analyze neoliberal framing of international development assistance and related discourse (e.g., international health campaigns) tend to posit neoliberalism in terms of power over, in the sense that donor agencies exercise *power over* aid recipients (Dutta 2006; Sastry and Dutta 2013). The latter scholars offer valuable contributions regarding public understanding of international development aid discourse and unequivocally state that “future scholarship ought to further examine the paradoxes and dialectics through which local actors and partners negotiate the global partnerships to carry out a politics of resistance both locally and globally” (Sastry and Dutta 2013, p. 37).

Dematerialized poststructuralism need not be the ultimate perspective, but one can argue that the specific context of international development aid warrants more than just a dominators/dominated understanding of power. Thus, viewing neoliberalism as discourse

permits us to incorporate poststructuralist and political economist perspectives into the analysis of power, and to accommodate the dichotomy between dematerialized poststructuralism and Marxian political economics. Moreover, the call for a similar merger in the field of international development studies (and a reconceptualization of the role of the donor agency) has been around for more than a decade (Storey 2000).

REFLECTION ON CULTURE-CENTRIC IMAGINATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT AID

Culture-centric frameworks are not immune to the internal contradictions that characterize human societies and cultures. Because of this, culture-centric concepts such as Afrocentricity (Asante 2003) may be less self-reflexive, especially given institutional tensions that constrain the bottom-up approaches to development and related aid (Waisbord 2008). Moreover, Young (2006) has critiqued Afrocentricity as having an idealized image of African cultures. However, cultural experiences such as gender oppression/patriarchy in Africa suggest that a lack of self-reflexivity and an exclusively Afrocentric outlook may not fully address the rationalities that facilitate neoliberalism. Under the guise of the transcendental subject, class divisions within the black community are suppressed and, in turn, advance the class interests of the elites (Young 2006, p. 33). Young finds that Afrocentrism, like dematerialized poststructuralism, seeks to suppress class, which is perhaps why Young wants to bring materialism back into cultural studies.

Some scholars consider Marxism and poststructuralism as forms of self-alienation and an inferiority complex that prompt, for example, black intellectuals (e.g., Asante 1993) to look for solace in Eurocentric concepts and experiences. Some African development scholars find that their use is rather a dilemma (Chukwuokolo 2009) and others, such as Ngwainmbi (2005), find that scholars may view the combinatorial use of Asiatic, Eurocentric, and Afrocentric ideas as an encompassing and beneficial way of thinking about development. The section that follows takes this line of thinking further by considering the conceptual implications embedded in how and why neoliberalism thrives through the discourse it constructs in the context of communication and international development studies.

AID AS DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

While this chapter does not claim to have worked out the ontological and epistemological differences found in the field of international development and communication studies, the special context of international aid calls for a more encompassing way of navigating the discourse of development and related aid. This way of understanding the development aid challenge is important, because conceptual polarities have practical consequences vis-à-vis the ways in which development and related communication interventions are imagined and implemented. For example, in both elite and popular culture, there is some apprehension induced by the word “development”—mostly because of its association with modernization or Eurocentrism, whereby the so-called developing countries are reportedly trying to be like or catch up with the developed world. When the word *development* becomes impossible to avoid, some commentators prefer to use *traditional development* (e.g., Prahalad 2014) or *post development* (Escobar 2000a, b). Because most countries in the global South depend on aid from economically powerful countries, the meanings associated with the term *development* become difficult to wish away.

Precisely because development as a concept is infused with both poststructuralist and hegemonic aftertastes, scholars and practitioners who operate at the opposite ends of the two schools of thought may find themselves in different but overlapping semantic fields. For example, poststructuralists concerned with the practical consequences of language and meaning share grievances with political economists regarding the beguiling implications embedded in the discourse of development and related conditions such as development aid.

Some thinkers justify the importance of development aid through the rhetoric of *progress* and improvement. Attempts to render the term development by using alternative words such as sustainable de-growth, post development, or traditional development tend to sustain and reify the concept, allowing it to re-emerge as “a zombie concept that is alive and dead at the same time” (Gudynas 2011, p. 442). This discourse-based debate is indeed welcome. In particular, the debate should interest practitioners as well as scholars concerned with the work of communication and development, because the way we think about and communicate

meanings is the way we often act. This way of thinking about discourse and its practical consequences, which Burke (1984) echoes, eloquently reminds us that concepts are ways both of seeing and of not seeing. In fact, these commendable efforts that seek to recast the idea of development should invite scholars to understand the concept of development (and related notions such as neoliberalism) as discourse. Such an orientation can boost theory and praxis, especially in this struggling but important field of international development and related communication studies (Storey 2000).

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTROVERSY AND NEOLIBERALISM

Evidently, the controversial concept of international development tends to evoke the idea of neoliberalism. Although neoliberalism is a fluid concept, most scholars agree on four lines of thinking. The first sees neoliberalism as *policy and program*. The latter concerns itself with issues such as privatization, deregulation, and liberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Kelpies and Vance 2003; Martinez and Garcia 2000; Springer 2012; Ward and England 2007). The second line of thought sees neoliberalism as a state form, defined as a “process of transformation that states purposefully engage into remain economically competitive within a transnational playing field of similarly minded states” (Springer 2012, p. 136). The discourse of development aid is also involved with thinking about neoliberalism, namely, with considering neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideological project (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Klepeis and Vance 2003; Sastry and Dutta 2011, 2013). Other thinkers consider neoliberalism as governmentality (e.g., see Ferguson and Gupta 2012; Escobar 2000a, b; Lemke 2002).

Although the concept of governmentality and its bearing on neoliberalism were first developed mainly within the context of Western democracies by Foucault (1991), scholars such as Ferguson and Gupta (2012) extend it to non-Western settings such as Africa and Asia. Ferguson and Gupta (2012) contest hegemonic understandings of neoliberalism, which consider neoliberalism as an overarching, concrete, and powerful force that operates from above. Ferguson and Gupta’s insights are rooted in their concept of transnational governmentality, since they see—in modern international relations and institutions—an increase in the

de-satiation of traditional state power by the proliferation of what they call quasi-autonomous NGOs or civil society.

THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH, NEOLIBERALISM, AND DEMOCRACY

Even though both top-down and bottom-up views of neoliberalism start from different places, they share a common concern regarding power and praxis in the international development challenge, especially the need for resistance and a place-based conceptualization of international development interventions (Escobar 2001; Sastry and Dutta 2011; Dutta 2004). Sastry and Dutta (2011), for example, contest top-down/neoliberal approaches by calling for more participatory and culture-based interventions. While this perspective is viable, advocates of culture-based interventions need to start looking into the great challenge posed by local variability and internal cultural contradictions.

Up to this point, however, development programs that apply for participatory programs (such as entertainment education) attract disagreement between scholars. For example, some researchers suggest that entertainment education has the potential to promote free communication (Jacobson and Storey 2004; Tufte 2001; Waisbord and Obregon 2012). Others, such as Dutta (2006), find that when international donors fund such programs, they serve to promote Western values through indirect ways, such as health interventions and related communication. Yet others, such as Waisbord and Obregon (2012), are nuanced about the nature of aid, simply choosing to state that “the reality of health aid programs, including communication experiences, is more messy and unpredictable than Dutta acknowledges” (p. 25).

Furthermore, advocates of participatory approaches assume that cultures in the global South are traditionally democratic and inherently bottom-up. However, most cultures in the global South can be said to have followed a more or less similar trajectory of power structures that do not lend themselves well to participatory (i.e., people’s power) understandings. From absolute monarchical power to colonial and postcolonial dictatorships, one can argue that people in most global South settings have only been coping with if not internalizing normalized, top-down political cultures. Besides, there is more to revolutionary concepts of participation—such as the local and the grassroots, as opposed to neocolonial or globalizing hegemonies—than meets the eye. Most states in the global South are economically broke and are required by development

agencies to hold regular elections to secure aid or survive debt crisis. Rahnema (1990) observes that since “governments have learned to control and contain participation, significant political advantages are often obtained through the ostentatious display of participatory intentions” (p. 202). Democratic ideals in such cases are skillfully hampered through corrupt electoral systems or the creation of a phantom civil society, such as what Ferguson and Gupta (2012) describe as GONGOS (government-organized NGOs).

PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Participation is, in many ways, a very attractive paradigm and it owes its legitimacy to the failures of what is known today as traditional development. However, the celebration of participation in development discourse (which is almost always unquestioned) echoes Rahnema’s (1990) critique, which asserts that the zeal constitutes “the last temptation of saint development.” These questions and debates surrounding the concept of development need to be worked out through a self-reflexive process, because often factors that lead to the failure of development projects spring from both Western and global South dynamics. Because of discourses that operate through dichotomous reactions and the positive emotional energy that participation often commands, it may not be easy to critique the grassroots head on. However, failure to examine such discourses may impede a self-reflexive discussion regarding issues of corruption and other socioeconomic shortcomings, and effectively undermine the ideals of open dialogue and democracy that motivate participatory approaches. Ferguson and Gupta (2012) posit that the needed self-reflexivity can be accomplished by questioning both commonsense assumptions about the verticality of states as well as many received ideas of “community,” “grassroots,” and the “local” (1990). Hence, we cannot comprehend that neoliberalism cannot function solely as either bottom-up or top-down “by constituting an external and supposedly omnipresent neoliberalism. Otherwise, we neglect internal constitution, local variability, and the role that ‘the social’ and individual agency play in (re)producing, facilitating, and circulating neoliberalism” (Springer, p. 136).

The diversity of the conceptual framework of neoliberalism manifests care and concern on the part of people who study international development and related communication interventions. Scholars such as Fox (2012) find that “the passion with which new labels for health

communication are developed and launched, makes it hard to build a field by the accumulation of evidence” (pp. 64–65). More scholars have been opening up debates about the possibility of dialectical and integrative approaches, particularly in areas that seek to examine the relationship between neoliberalism, international development, and the work of social change (Gilbert 2005; McCarthy and Prudham 2006; Papa et al. 2006; Raco 2005; Springer 2012). Springer (2012) finds practical value in problematizing frameworks that condition our understanding and constrain our self-reflexive capabilities. That constitutes a more encompassing way of apprehending neoliberalism and navigating the international development aid challenge. Therefore, it makes sense to consider Springer’s call for flexibility and, most importantly, self-reflexivity, because “together they may assist in disestablishing neoliberalism’s rationalities, deconstructing its strategies, disassembling its technologies, and ultimately destroying its techniques” (pp. 143–144). As a variegated and fluid concept (Cotoi 2011), one can use neoliberalism for many purposes, and its rationalities can manifest both local and extra-local realities. Indeed, endeavors that seek to engage neoliberalism in the context of development aid need not be dichotomous or construed as either top-down or bottom-up.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored conceptual dichotomies within the special context of international development and related aid. The latter context recasts these dichotomies as dialectical tensions that bind the institutional bureaucracy and rhetoric of securing donor funds to do the work of development internationally. Scholars have explored and outlined controversial but illuminating concepts such as neoliberalism and development and their polarizing consequences vis-à-vis theory and praxis. Because scholars of development studies and global social change express a need for convergence between such conceptual divides, it seems more pragmatic to posit development aid and related concepts as discourse. The latter outlook allows for a more encompassing understanding of the special context of international development aid (i.e., from a discursive perspective). Scholars and practitioners are therefore encouraged to continue the problematization of discourse and ways in which aid is used to justify development endeavors. While development continues to be a

moving target in the global South, it will perhaps be necessary always to keep (re)examining development even when it happens.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is your definition of neoliberalism? Should emerging economies embrace it?
2. Expatriates, as well as development agencies in developing countries, tend to rely on the development paradigms and experiences from the region where they studied. Critics have complained that a state that applies multiple development theories causes confusion and underdevelopment. If you agree with this assessment, which unique approach should a country select and on what basis? If you do not agree, explain and support your position.
3. Should each country identify and implement its development approach to meet the conditions being set by the forces of globalization? Explain the reasons for your answer.
4. Do you agree that Africa's heavy dependence on foreign assistance is largely responsible for poverty, underdevelopment, and weak public institutions?

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