



Looking from the South, Speaking from Home: African women confronting development

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ABSTRACT Jessica Horn interrogates the discourse and practice of development in the post-independence, globalized world. She argues that development, defined in Euro-American forums, has been unresponsive to the varied needs of African women. She shows that it is African women themselves who are now confronting the Euro-centric presumptions of development, and are working to better the lives of women on the continent through place-based coalitions and culturally sensitive activism.

KEYWORDS difference; equality; meeting places; politics of place; post-development

Looking from the South

Development. . . . This word defined from the West, it sets with the sun. And so when I looked to the West I could not quite find myself in defining this word. And everywhere I searched in the South, I saw people and people and more people. And these people never left the center. . . . And I rememory [sic] in the footsteps of Toni Morrison that [the African] woman's herstory is itself development. For she has not participated in raping Africa of its resources. She has not participated in creating the corrupt governments that exist on the African continent today. Only when she is on the periphery. Only when she is being used (Mugo, 1999).

I begin with these words of Kenyan writer-in-exile Micere Githae Mugo as a means of expressing how profoundly disruptive the experience of the past half century of 'development' has been for African people, and particularly for African women. Not only in the sense of structural upheavals with adjustment policies, heavy industrialization and mono-crop agriculture that have widened the gaps of economic inequity, commercialized communal lands and marginalized the production of subsistence foods. But in the social and cultural dislocations created by silencing the complex systems of science, agriculture,

environment management, language, medicine and trade already existing in the spaces of the so-called 'underdeveloped'.

I re-examine the 'culture' of development and its historical partner, neoliberal globalization, as a means of exposing the silencing power of these discourses for African women. I examine the possible strategies for securing more stable livelihoods proposed by post-development theorist Gilbert Rist (1999), and by African women themselves. Turning towards the African continent I look at how African women are redefining development and the terms of their empowerment through a 'defense of place' (Dirlik, 1998), reaffirming the importance of their particular cultural and historical locations in the midst of a trend to erase these particularities under the amorphous discourse of the 'global'. While exposing these silences my intent is not to frame African women as voiceless, but rather to point out developers' deafness to the innovative and appropriate strategies of empowerment that African women have and continue to articulate and enact.

In his history of development, Gilbert Rist traces the roots of development discourse from Aristotle through the Enlightenment to Truman, alongside the expansion of capitalism, the creation of the world system, and the rise of American hegemony. In the process he exposes the Euro-American culture that informs development discourse, as well as the economic and cultural power relations that exist behind the easy dichotomies of developed/underdeveloped (Rist, 1999: 47-79). Couched in Darwinian metaphors of 'growth' and 'evolution', Rist argues, development has been constructed as the 'natural' progress of humanity, in turn creating what he calls a 'messianic faith' in the redemptive powers of capitalist development. It is the belief in the necessity of economic growth and the 'voluntarist enthusiasm' for 'helping the poor', argues Rist, that allows the faith to persist despite the obvious pitfalls and dismal failures of the development endeavour (Rist, 1999: 212).

A holistic approach to development

The short sighted vision of the founding architects of development has remained a part of the

discourse of policy-makers and practitioners. Caught in the simplicity of economic equations, planners have failed on the whole to see the social structures, power relations and knowledge systems embedded in the communities where development theory is applied. Gender policy in particular suffers from this blind spot in the vision of development practitioners. Analyses of the Women in Development, Women and Development, and Gender and Development schools have revealed the limited success of these approaches in addressing the complexity of gendered power relations (Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Mohanty, 1996). Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison (1998) isolate three central problems of the approach to gender in development practice. These are the conception of gender as a 'women's issue', the inordinate emphasis on data collection rather than transformative practice, and the focus on a liberal conception of empowerment, conceived of in terms of individual economic power. Together these strategies not only represent a top-down, western biased approach to gender, but also tend to be apolitical, ignoring the subtleties of power and gendered space within a given context (Crewe and Harrison, 1998: 49-68).

Crewe and Harrison use the case of an aquaculture development project in the Luapula province of Zambia to demonstrate the inadequacy of the argument that economic empowerment leads to development. In their research they found that while the women involved in the aquaculture project held a variety of opinions, on the whole their concern was not with the potential income produced but rather the fish produced that could contribute to their family's diet. Furthermore, the authors explain that the concept of social status is far more complex than simply economic standing, and hence an increased income does not necessarily lead to increased authority or social recognition (Crewe and Harrison, 1998: 119-25). It is no wonder that development projects such as this continue to be met with limited enthusiasm, given the fact that the founding imperatives of the projects were not defined with the advice of women in the community, nor were they necessarily defined with the interests of these women in mind. Such critical analyses of development projects in Africa reveal that it is, in the end, the 'beneficiaries' of

these projects who are left to re-negotiate their lives after being subjected to the misdirected concerns and misplaced aid moneys of development agencies. But while projects have been pursued to the detriment of some, the accompanying material aid has been to the enjoyment of others. Given what Achille Mbembe (1992) calls a culture of excess and 'obscenity' in the leadership of many African states, government ministers and national elites have been all too pleased to receive aid money and the mysterious influx of Mercedes Benzes. Indeed in countries where the passage of resources from the state and independent organizations to the citizenry has already been corroded by corruption, aid money has often exacerbated, rather than alleviated, internal economic hierarchies.

The rapid acceleration of neoliberal globalization in the past two decades has been a source of even greater disenfranchisement on the African continent. For where development sought, in principle at least, to incorporate women into the economy, globalization has pushed them out, with the result that many African women now scrape together a living in the 'survival economy' of the informal sector. In Uganda the economic instability has become so dire that middle class professional women have been forced to join the urban poor on the pavements, selling food and black-market commodities in order to supplement their insufficient income (Obbo, 1991).

For Rist neither development nor globalization are inevitable, 'natural' processes. In fact for him the era of development is over, and he argues that '[i]t is time to get out – time to move from realization of failure to an act of rejection' (1999: 236). Though wary of generalizations he suggests three 'strategies of transgression' for the path ahead. The first, proposed by Christian Comelieu, is to 'reform' development, maintaining economic growth as a valid goal while securing fair trade policies and a transfer of technologies from multinationals to the global South. The idea is to restructure the commitments of donors so that they align with the actual needs of recipients. One obvious problem with this suggestion is the fact that neither global trade nor the multinationals that dominate it act out of benevolence, nor in the interests of the economically weak. In fact recent proposals concerning

intellectual property rights and agricultural reform legislation in the World Trade Organization show that the inequities of trade are moving, if anywhere, from bad to worse.

The second and third suggestions take a more subversive approach by looking away from development to envision new ways of structuring social life. Rist advocates turning our attention to new social movements emphasizing autonomy from international economic structures and also the nation-state. This is to be combined with generating social theory from the discourses and practices of these new social movements. This theorizing is intended to break apart the 'truths' of growth and progress and locate the Euro-centric biases, thereby challenging development at its conceptual core, rather than calling for a revision on a few of its practices. There is great value in theorizing development and post-development, particularly through the discourse analysis that Rist engages in, in that it frames development as social construction rather than incontestable truth, exposing its authors, and also naming those that these authors silence.

This production of theory must be undertaken with the understanding that theory in itself is not the end point, and that its purpose is to inform actual *practice*. I do feel somewhat hesitant in surrendering the task of envisioning new social alternatives solely to theoreticians, particularly those in the North, given that in the current commercialized arena of academia (particularly in America) these words rarely reach the people whose lives they are seeking to transform. And when they do, the language is often so abstruse that the analysis cannot even be understood by those the theorists are claiming to defend. African women scholars, and particularly those educated on the continent, are sensitive to what they see as exclusionary language and analysis used in northern and particularly post-modern feminist forums.¹ Already faced with a 'poverty of theory' on women's experience in the African context, African women now also contend with 'an imperious feminist script [with the result that] instead of being emancipatory, writing for them is often alienating' (Lazreg cited in Okeke, 1996: 228). This concern about the inaccessibility of theory has

been voiced by other activists and scholars from Asia, Latin America and the Pacific (Harcourt, 1999: 7–11). With that said there is an important place for politically engaged theorizing, particularly when produced by those most affected by the discourses and practices of development.

The rejection Rist proposes would be, ultimately, a complete abandonment of the existing structures and values of development, and a search outside the systems for new alternatives (Rist, 1999: 243–5). Merely reforming the system will not succeed, he argues, since ‘the elimination of abuses will only be aimed at making it function better’ (Rist, 1999: 46). Herein lies the great potential of social movements to radically transform development. Rist explains,

The idea . . . in spite of ‘development’, is to organize and invent new ways of life – between modernization, with its sufferings but also some advantages, and a tradition from which people may derive inspiration while knowing that it can never be revived. (Rist, 1999: 244)

This process of re-invention is being enacted by African women in a variety of contexts, as I shall discuss. However, the viability of the complete ‘rejection’ that Rist proposes remains to be seen.

In defence of place

There has been an increasing focus, in recent social theory, on the importance of place in resistance to the discourses of ‘globalization’ and ‘globalism’ that have gained ascendancy as frameworks for viewing the world. Arif Dirlik (1998) speaks against the assumption that the ‘global’ now predominates and determines the affairs of the ‘local’, arguing that this constructs the local as static and synchronic. While calling for a renewed ‘place consciousness’, he also extends this act of ‘placing’ to globalism itself ‘in order to reveal its own location’ within capitalism and western discourses (Dirlik, 1998: 11).² The defence of place is a move that rejects the notion of the ‘global village’, knowing that people of the South and particularly those marginalized in their own nations by ethnicity, class position and rural location will remain at the gates of this unfolding ‘global’ society, outside of the debate though objects of it. The resistance, the

act of positioning oneself within a particular history and landscape, particularly one that has been historically marginalized, is itself political, for it is a refusal of the identity of ‘global’ that depoliticizes and negates difference in favour of a mythical universal. In this way, Dirlik describes ‘place consciousness’ as ‘the radical other of globalism’ (Dirlik, 1998: 8).

Africans are necessarily sensitive to global geopolitics and their ‘place’ in it, having emerged from the experience of colonialism into a ‘new’ economic system defined, once again, by the North. And with the international scene set for even greater proliferation of globalization and development, many communities have been pushed to tackle the feasibility of ‘rejecting’ these western derived discourses and structures. In southern forums people continue to ask how to confront the nihilism of neoliberal globalization and the disruption that development has brought to peoples’ lives over the past half century. The question these southern activists pose is compelling. How do we resist the continuing attempts to erase local knowledges, commercialize communal land, extend the obviously inequitable ‘free’ market and implant a consumer culture in all parts of the globe? That is to say, how do we break away from the deracinating processes of global de-localization and engage in a process of re-rooting? The answer of many groups in the South has been to turn away from the marketplace towards the *homeplace*, reaffirming a commitment to reconstitute their way of life against the grain of the current globalizing trends. Far from being static or essentialized, these homeplaces are sites where heterogeneity and diversity are nurtured, where there is an emphasis on mutual responsibility between people and between people and the environment.³

This defence of place has held enduring importance in the African context. Throughout history African women have stood in defence of their communities and have persisted in ‘creating space in non-space’ (Mugo, 1999), charting their own geographies from which to speak and act. African women were central actors in national liberation and decolonization struggles all over the continent (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997: 188–99), and where they did not lead were vocally recognized in the

revolutionary manifestos and social policies of the new nations. In these past movements, place was explicitly territorialized and linked to a geographically bounded nation state. But the increasing migration of professionals, intellectuals, job seekers and political exiles out of Africa, and the internal displacement of peoples within the continent, has transformed conceptions of belonging, at times invoking a sense of crisis and placelessness, and at times an increased sense of connectedness between different national and ethnic groups. The inclusion of African countries in the process of 'globalization', with its global capital flows and Internet communications, has itself contributed to this transformation of conceptions of space and place. Doreen Massey explains, in general terms, the new construction of place in the globalized world by saying 'what gives space its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. It is indeed a *meeting place*' (Massey, 1993: 235).

Meeting places

It is this process of 'meeting' that is enacted in African women's forums. The identity of 'African woman' is itself a new and hybrid creation, constituted through varied interactions with colonial powers, western academia, Pan-African philosophies, and the meeting of the women of various ethnic and national origins in locations outside of Africa. The sense of connection and solidarity that the identity engenders has become an important mobilizing tool, and a means of presenting collective claims outside of the African context. At the same time, this more volatile sense of place has manifested in a number of networks and associations that link African scholars, activists and professionals across the continent and indeed the globe around issues of women's health, law, journalism, political representation, gender equity and of course development. The African Women's Global Network (AWOGNet) is an example of one such network that seeks to unite its NGO and independent members around the improvement of living standards for African women and children. The

network sponsors research projects on a range of topics including language preservation, sustainable agriculture and the creation of a centre for the study of indigenous sciences in the Casamance region of Senegal.⁴

The Internet has played an important role in enabling many of the transnational networks to grow and thrive. At the same time women of the South remain conscious of the exclusiveness and northern orientation of much of cyberspace transaction. In light of this, activist networks have made a principled commitment to democratizing the use of these technologies in the South, while making the technologies relevant in the contexts of local research and organizing. Aware of the growing importance of the Internet, organizations such as the African Gender Institute in Cape Town, South Africa, have launched Internet literacy and accessibility campaigns to 'contribute to the increasing flow of electronic information [on gender] from South to North'.⁵ More experimental projects aimed at exploring the power relations of Internet use have also been conducted. One example is the Women on the Net (WoN) project sponsored by UNESCO and the Society for International Development. Through WoN a web-ring was created between activists and academics from the South and marginal groups in the North to explore the potential uses of new information technologies as a political mobilizing tool (Harcourt, 1999).

The democratization of Internet access is unfortunately a long way from being achieved. As it stands, 70 percent of the world has never even made a phone call let alone logged on-line. Where this is the case, organizing and activism remain more locally based. The Greenbelt movement in Kenya begun by Wangari Maathai, a Professor at the University of Nairobi, in 1977 is a much heralded example of the success of these local social movements. The Greenbelt movement addresses the issue of rural environmental degradation by mobilizing women around the planting of trees. Membership is secured on a voluntary basis. However, individual women and women's organizations that participate are paid for each tree that they distribute to local farmers. Public awareness campaigns for new members focus on the local geopolitics of environmental degradation, addressing

the problems of what Maathai calls 'development with destruction' (cited in Ndegwa, 1996: 87). In the repressive political climate of the Moi regime, the Greenbelt Movement has provided a forum for challenging government environmental policies, and also politicizing some 500,000 members around the social, economic and political inequities at play in Kenya (Ndegwa, 1996: 81–108). Through the project of tree planting the movement has thus achieved the multiple tasks of reforestation, providing a political education and income generating activities for rural women, and mobilizing women for political action against government repression. This is all achieved in a manner that affirms the expertise of the participants and the autonomy of their membership.

Both locally-based movements such as the Greenbelt Movement and international organizations such as the African Women's Global Network take their ethnic, geographical and gender locations as the beginning point of discussion and action around the question of 'development'. However, each group or community enacts varying degrees of 'rejection' of development discourse based on the access they have to the domains of power. The political situation of local, place-based movements is perhaps more precarious, since these are often rural movements constituted of peoples on the margins of their own nations and the global arena. When such movements do present significant challenges to power structures they face potentially violent repression, particularly when the interests of capital are at stake. This point raises the need for local social movements to build regional or international solidarity networks with movements engaging in similar actions and critiques.

The situation of the transnational women's networks tends to be more secure by virtue of the class position and authority of many of their members. Networks of professionals, for example, are less likely to encounter repression than rural coalitions. Nonetheless, participation in the transnational arena does have drawbacks, particularly when the networks intersect with mainstream organizations such as the United Nations. The tendency here for critiques to be neutralized and co-opted into mainstream policy is not unknown. Indeed while the

International Women's Conferences have provided a point of entry for southern women and indigenous women of the North into the arena of global policy-making, many of the critical proposals have lost their subversive edge once accepted by the mainstream forums or converted into the UN language of 'rights'.⁶ This does not negate the extreme importance of the presence of African women in these policy-making forums. The question of whether to work 'inside' or 'outside' in order to transform a system like development reigns perennially. However, with 'the way forward' ungeneralizable and certainly unclear, there is an enduring need to engender transformative politics in *all* forums.

Towards difference-in-equality

The guiding principle in the African women's organizations discussed is a respect for the plurality of cultures, knowledges, social structures and means of political organizing between African peoples and between Africa and the West. Rooting themselves firmly in the context of their own historical experience, while also working within western and international arenas, these organizations affirm what Escobar (1999) calls 'difference-in-equality', the principle of respecting and encouraging difference in strategies while acknowledging the many sites of interconnection. Coming through a history of colonialism, African women's networks and organizations strategically resist the homogeneity of development models while confirming the importance of self-generated knowledge and practice.

There is much to learn from these strategies of organizing. For we do in fact have to find a way of living together in the world and in our natural environments, a way of healing from physical and structural violence that has grown to predominate in North–South relations over the past 500 years. And a way of terminating the economic terrorism of neoliberal globalization that threatens to continue this damage. The redistribution of resources between North and South, elites and the poor is a vital component of this rebalancing process. But redistribution will not happen spontaneously, rather, it needs to be encouraged by a different ethic

of interaction between the realms of privilege and disadvantage. The conversation must begin then with a critical transformation of the culture of exclusion and arrogance that has come to dominate the 'globalized' world, and through this global policy. This process of recovery necessitates a deep reflection on the assumptions of the superiority of western technology and know-how and the imperative to 'develop' that are embedded in development discourse.

Samia Mehrez speaks of the process of decolonization as 'an act of exorcism that involves *both* the colonized and the colonizer. . . . [It is] a process of liberation from dependency in the case of the colonized, and from imperialist racist perceptions, representations and institutions . . . in the case of the colonizer' (Mehrez cited in Hooks, 1992).

So too with the process of confronting the violent inequities of the current global system which development has played a hand in creating. For what is needed here is not only a commitment to reflection and redefinition on the part of the so-called 'underdeveloped'. The developers, and the 'developed' themselves, need to engage in a very deep process of reflection over the beliefs that guide their actions and the relations of power that enable them.

A dialogue beyond development

Social movements and place-based organizations in Africa and other regions of the South have already begun to instigate this dialogue by questioning the accepted 'truths' of development, and proposing their own strategies to attain living conditions necessary for survival and health. In the North place-based critique is increasingly emerging, in response, somewhat ironically, to the globalization policies propagated by northern governments themselves. By threatening to widen inequities and disenfranchise workers in the North, neoliberalism is undermining itself and has instigated increasingly vocal critique. Witness the broad-based resistance ignited in Seattle and later Washington DC in response to World Trade Organization and IMF-World Bank policies.

It is the persistence of this critique, firmly rooted in action on local and international levels, that will reconfigure global power relations and challenge the homogeneity of globalization and development discourses. And, most importantly, these critiques must begin from and remain rooted in the histories and cultural geographies in which each of us stands.

Notes

1 Ama Ata Aidoo and other African feminists direct a similar critique towards 'postcolonial theorists', many of whom are also African or from the Diaspora. Aidoo's caricature of the theorists who 'are either talking to themselves, talking to each other or talking to God' (Aidoo, personal communication) points to the disjuncture between the theory produced and the actual people it is speaking for.

2 At the same time Dirlik is wary of the potential of the return to place to manifest as place-based fundamentalisms, like the white militia movements in the American South. But his proposition is not completely

relativistic in the sense that it does not suggest that all place-based strategies provide equitable solutions to globalizing trends. Movements based on the desire for exclusion run in obvious contradiction to Dirlik's concern for diversity.

3 Many of the critiques have come from indigenous peoples, and those living in rural areas for whom sustaining local ecologies takes primacy in their activities and actions. In Latin America in particular these movements have articulated explicit ecological concerns (Appfel-Marglin, 1998; Esteva and Suri Prakash, 1998; Escobar, 1999). Rural-based coalitions in Africa such as the Greenbelt Movement, which I explore here, have also focused on

environmental politics.

4 <http://www.osu.edu/org/awognet/Research/Fractals>.

5 <http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi>.

6 Debates on population are one such example where critiques of coercive population control were accepted at the Cairo Conference under the guise of 'women's empowerment', and then used to justify further population control interventions (Hartman, 1995).

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