
Special Section

Development issues for the future: A South African perspective

Vishnu Padayachee

School of Development Studies, Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
E-mail: padayacheev2@ukzn.ac.za

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The South African Context

Phillipe Hugon refers to the years from the mid-1970s to 1990 in France as the ‘period of modelization’ when debate was joined between orthodox policies and alternative models of development. Although the debate appears to have been won by the former, the outcome of this contestation, he observes, was that the Francophone development tradition still gives prominence to questions that set development economics apart as a specific discipline: it takes into account the specificity of the basic units and of their architecture; it adopts a long-term perspective and tackles the historical density of society and it takes account of spatial asymmetries and dynamics (1991, p. 100).

Something similar marked the South African debate in the period I have referred to as the ‘decade of liberation’, 1985–1995 (Padayachee, 1998): specificity, the long term, historical density and spatial dynamics. Politics, power and class were seen to be essential forces in the writings of the academics and activists then. This was true not only of academia, but in the work of the progressive policy think tanks formed and backed by the ANC during this period.

The approach taken in these think-tanks was, however, soon discarded by the ANC in government, notably with the publication in 1996 of the highly orthodox Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) program, which was accompanied by an injunction that the program was ‘non-negotiable’. GEAR was arguably one of the most inflexible and intransigent interpretations of neo-liberal orthodoxy in the world, and produced little growth at first (it started to push into the 4–5 per cent per annum range only after 2001 and has fallen back since 2007). It furthermore produced negative employment growth and no noticeable redistribution, apart from towards a very small group of Mbeki-aligned black businessmen and women as the beneficiaries of ‘Black Economic Empowerment’.

The logic behind the first post-apartheid government’s insistence on adopting the Washington Consensus ‘development’ model, even after its doctrines had been largely abandoned by those who promulgated them, remains an enigma today. An exploration of the history of development studies in South Africa however throws some light on the question.

Development Studies in South Africa¹

‘Development studies’ was hardly taught as a subject in South Africa in the postwar decades. Something like a development studies program, drawing on various disciplines,

was established at the University of the Witwatersrand only in the mid-1970s. It trained a small group of people who became hugely influential in the South African struggle and later in academia and policy-making. This training was mainly in Marxist political economy and research, focused on the nature of the South African state, about work and labour in Africa, modes of production and the like. The program failed to receive support and died.

UKZN's School of Development Studies came into being as the Institute for Social Research (ISR) in 1954, using money from the Carnegie Commission originally intended to investigate the Poor White problem in the 1930s, and it had both teaching and research functions. The School has been through various transformations over the last half-century. In the mid-1970s, the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) was formed from ISR. Its research focus was mostly on social development, community development and 'quality of life' studies.

The Development Studies Unit (DSU) was established in 1982 under the inspirational leadership of Jill Natrass. Research at CASS and DSU received a boost from the rapidly changing political context. DSU merged with CASS in 1988 to become the Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS). Although it continued the positivist tradition of survey-based work on housing and urban poverty, a strong western Marxist tradition also took root.²

Discussions in the early 1990s about a new development strategy for the post-apartheid government, carried out in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, however soon turned towards a more technical, modeling-based approach to economic strategy and policy, partly under the impulse of more global trends. Four key concerns and concomitant dilemmas can be said to have characterized mainstream development studies in South Africa as a result of this particular turn:

(i) *The limits of measurement*

A concern with measurement and getting the data right is not new. After industrial capitalism had become thoroughly rooted into Europe and in the face of Marx's critique, some prominent social scientists turned to issues of measurement. The question, as Taylor (1962, p. 380) put it, was: 'Did the condition of the working classes improve or deteriorate during the period of rapid industrial change between 1780 and 1850?' This made it necessary to measure changes in living standards through the movement of real wages, changes in patterns of working-class consumption and indicators of health and longevity.

In 1988, the World Bank initiated the *Living Standards Measurement Study*, which was linked to assessment of structural adjustment programs and was undertaken in over a hundred developing countries. A similar study (the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development) was commissioned for South Africa by the ANC 'government-in-waiting' on the eve of democratic elections. This 1993 study was conducted by the Southern African Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (see May, 2005).

This aspect of our work as social scientists has enormous value. My point, however, is that measurement data and definitions should not be allowed to deflect the discourse into narrow technical *cul-de-sac*. There are limits to what can be achieved by striving for undefined perfection in the measurement techniques at the expense of larger development challenges. Thus, Martin Greeley (1994), for example, warns of the limitations in trying to measure indicators of welfare broader than income (such as good governance and quality of life), especially when reductions in absolute poverty are still a primary objective.

The core development concerns in South Africa today are with such measurement issues as: What is the extent of poverty and inequality? What are the level and rate of unemployment? How big is the informal economy? How high is the social wage? How many people have died of AIDS? How accurate are growth figures? How accurate is the Gini coefficient?

(ii) *Marginalizing class and power*

For a few decades now there has been a tendency to ‘cleanse’ development studies of considerations of power, class and politics. James Ferguson (1990) captured this trend in his notion of an ‘anti-politics machine’ that ‘depoliticizes’ development, and

marginalizes or displaces investigation and understanding of the sources, dynamics and effects of typically savage social inequality in the South, and of no less savage relations of power and inequality in the international economic and political system. It elides consideration of the violent social upheavals and struggles that characterize the processes and outcomes of the development of capitalism (Bernstein, 2005, p. 14).

I would contend that academic and policy debates and struggles around development are indeed about power, class, (often) also race, ethnicity and gender dynamics and not only about narrow economic calculations. So relegating these considerations in development discourse will undoubtedly weaken our understanding.

(iii) *The power of economics*

If class, power and political struggle have disappeared from development discourse in many parts of the world, mainstream economics has been granted free range in the making and implementation of policy. Yet it cannot do this alone (Kanbur, 2002), especially not the virulent brand of neoclassical economics that dominates development discourse today. According to Bernstein (2005, p. 18):

Another type of constraint on intellectual work in Development Studies stems from the [hegemony] of neo-classical economics, which has spiralled during the neo-liberal ascendancy, including the latest manifestations ... of its ambition to subsume much of sociological and political inquiry within its own paradigm ... And [it] provides intellectual support, with more or less plausibility, to the good intentions of ‘win-win’ discourse in development policy.

Insistence within neoclassical economics on the totalizing primacy of mathematical modelling and econometrics is particularly problematic. Although modelling has its uses, we should also recognize its limitations. Nobel Prize winner Wassily Leontief complained in a 1970 address to economists that

the mathematical model-building industry has grown into one of the most prestigious, possibly the most prestigious branch of economics. [Unfortunately,] uncritical enthusiasm for mathematical formulation tends often to conceal the ephemeral content of the argument (cited in Jacoby, 1996, p. 159).

(iv) *Interdisciplinarity*

Although I accept the argument that development studies must be open, inter-disciplinary and involve several disciplines, most development studies schools appear to be multi-disciplinary rather than thoroughly inter-disciplinary, where theoretical and methodological integration and innovation across disciplines have been successfully mounted. However, Ravi Kanbur (2002, pp. 484–485) has pointed to the risks of multi- and inter-disciplinary strategies:

The social sciences need to come together to address specific and general problems in development studies and development policy. [But] there is the ever-present danger of the lowest common

denominator. Instead of the strengths of each discipline, we may pick up the weaknesses of each. In the end, disciplinary narrowness may simply be replaced by lack of clarity.

The question, then, is whether 'Development' as a distinct field within the academic division of labour offers us a real degree of freedom from disciplinary guilds, as Area Studies, Feminism, Marxism have? Has it become an ossified irrelevance or can it now make a comeback from the last three decades of fighting the dominant trend of global politics?

Development Issues for the Future

The lack of a long-established tradition of development studies in South Africa makes it difficult to identify how exactly these concerns will play out here, but I believe that a number of points can be made about the future. The arena of development policy or development strategy seems to be suffering to some extent from fatigue and frustration. If it is to be rescued from the hypocrisy and anti-development diatribes of the neo-liberal era (Hart, 2001, p. 650), do we need to revert to some older ideas (such as growth through redistribution), or should we devise entirely new ones? If so, what would be the core of any new approach?

Much more attention arguably needs to be given to the study of capitalist development in the varying forms that exist in the South or developing world: its origins and trajectories, what it does well and where it fails. We need more research from a political economy perspective on the nature and varieties of capitalism and how they impact on issues such as poverty, unemployment, governance and regional disparities. In Africa, for example, these studies might be limited by how many countries could be regarded as being truly capitalist, with South Africa the notable exception. But countries such as Botswana and Mauritius could be studied more fully as cases of successful market-led growth. In the case of Botswana, both its celebrated democracy and its ability to confer the benefits of diamonds-based growth on marginal communities like the San require more careful study.

Gill Hart (2001, p. 655) has argued for South Africa that:

Critical engagement with the revisionist neo-liberalism currently in ascendance is not just a matter of reasserting the development state [now all the rage in the dying days of the Mbeki administration]. The key issue rather, is the need to confront questions of capitalist development... Refocusing on... a non-reductionist understanding of class and power constitutes a vitally important terrain for intellectual engagement in a world of profound injustice and material inequality...

The study of development should be freed from the limitations of national boundaries. In Africa, this would mean coming to terms with possibilities for regional economic and social development possibilities. The agenda of African integration has its own peculiarities. Unlike the European or North American examples where there was an economic impetus towards integration, similar efforts in Africa previously arose out of a shared experience of colonial oppression and exploitation. The agency in charge of regional integration (the state) had the most to lose from it, and so Panafricanism failed. Civic participation should be a major component of any renewed move towards African integration. In this regard, it is encouraging that the African Union has distinguished itself from its predecessor by explicitly committing itself to a people-centred and participative development program (Muchie *et al*, 2006, p. 5).

Remaining at the continental level, it is surely also time to explore alternatives to the well-worn paths of primary exports, with manufacturing as a poor second. Keith Hart (2007) argues that 'the basis for Africa's future economic growth must be the cultural production of its cities and not rural extraction or the reactionary hope of reproducing capitalism's industrial phase'.

New research methodologies could be brought to bear on traditional development concerns such as poverty. Thus, the work headed by Julian May for over a decade on poverty dynamics in KwaZulu-Natal has used longitudinal or panel surveys as the foundation for a number of other studies, developing what May (2005, p. 247) calls 'household events mapping' based on using family trees, visual family histories and detailed stories to trace and explain changes in household poverty status over time. Such methods stimulated recall, uncovered meanings, ambiguities and under-reporting in survey data and led to more nuanced information about poverty.

The focus on poverty appears to be shifting to a wider, more nuanced and detailed understanding of the complexities of transitions. Such a shift offers space for experimentation within a research agenda that attacks the problem from a variety of social science traditions, both disciplinary and methodological. Thus, related research at UKZN concerns contemporary social movements of the poor and marginalized in South Africa and elsewhere, workers in Durban's informal economy, gender and taxation and panel studies of labour and marriage markets. These all contribute to deepening our understanding of poverty, without being explicitly focused on poverty itself.³

By Way of Conclusion

Whether as an inter-disciplinary field or as a topic requiring a trans-disciplinary approach, development studies should continue to rest on diverse expertise, heterodox theoretical approaches and innovative and mixed methodologies. The future of development studies must be directed by centres (such as SDS) based in developing countries that have a direct stake in policy debates in our countries. These centres must be able to attract the highest caliber of staff by offering a stimulating environment for research and scholarship, seeking out connections and networks with institutes in the North and entering into new forms of research collaboration, partnerships and exchange with them. Recognizing and facilitating the growth of such centres of excellence means that universities should change how they deal with them in research administration, funding and human resource management. That these centres should remain within universities in order to draw on the vibrant options for exchange and collaboration there should not be a matter of debate (May, 2007).

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Notes

1. Parts of this section draw on my Introductory chapter in ‘The Development Decade ...’ (Padayachee, 2006).
2. In 1995, CSDS established what was essentially a development studies taught-Masters program under Mike Morris. He was ably assisted by SOAS’s Henry Bernstein and Raphie Kaplinsky of IDS, Sussex, as well as by local colleagues from economic history, economics and planning. This research and graduate teaching program became the School of Development Studies in 1996.
3. In 2001, a teaching and research program in population studies and demography was added with support from the Mellon Foundation. In the same year, the University set up a Centre for Civil Society located within the School. Its activist work with local social movements in areas such as housing and informal settlements, environmental justice, xenophobia and energy, linked to global movements, and a prominent public seminar and workshop series, have transformed the School’s profile.

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