

# **NORDIC DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: LESSONS, PITFALLS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

**Wayne Coetzee and Fredrik Söderbaum  
School of Global Studies  
University of Gothenburg**

## **1. Introduction**

In November 2015, the Third Joint Nordic Conference on Development Research was organised by the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg (Sweden). Development research has a long (and rather strong) history in the Nordic<sup>1)</sup> countries. In fact, Nordic development studies have been able to respond continuously (and to some extent jointly) to the challenges over the last 50 years by producing thought-provoking research — as evidenced by a range of new approaches, new methodologies, new theories, extending both mono- and cross/interdisciplinary areas of study and innovative development policies.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, there was a fairly strong sense of 'Nordic-ness' among both researchers and policymakers. However, the so-called 'crisis of development studies' in the 1980s and 1990s impacted negatively on Nordic cooperation and both research and policy became more varied and fragmented.

In the early 2000s, attempts were made by leading Nordic development researchers to revitalise cooperation, which resulted in the First Joint Nordic Conference on Development Research in Copenhagen in 2011. The general purpose of the joint conferences is to bring together researchers and practitioners from the Nordic countries (and beyond) to debate and rethink contemporary issues in development research and policy. The inaugural conference of this 'new era of Nordic cooperation', held in Copenhagen in 2011, focused on the contribution of the Nordic perspectives and approaches to development/development studies *vis-à-vis* global and other approaches to development. Subsequent bi-

annual conferences have continued to explore the Nordic approach to development policy and research while at the same time addressing other critical issues in development research.

The second Joint Nordic Conference in Helsinki in 2013 focused on the role of knowledge production in and for development while the third held in Gothenburg in 2015 continued and deepened the discussions from previous conferences through the theme "A Changing Global Development Agenda?". It aimed, in particular, to address the development implications of global recovery, emerging powers, new patterns of vulnerability, as well as of economic crisis, environmental crises, urbanisation, and humanitarian and governance crises. The conference also reflected on the significance, content, and possible implications for the post-2015 global development agenda and the future of sustainable development. Attracting more than 200 participants from 18 countries, the conference in Gothenburg was organised around 17 working groups that involved more than 100 paper presentations, four thematic roundtables, and two keynote speeches by Professor Inge Kaul and Professor Adebayo Olukoshi.

The purpose of this report is to reflect on the status of Nordic development studies in light of the experience of the last conference in Gothenburg. To that end, we reflect on two themes that we consider as essential to the field of study but which causes both friction and fragmentation: (i) the many meanings of development; and (ii) Africa as a continued 'object' of Nordic development studies. The report concludes with a reflection about how we think different standpoints on these issues can be productively balanced.

## **2. The many meanings of 'development': frictions or creative pluralism?**

Everybody interested in 'development' knows that it is an essentially contested concept, implying that there is no consensus about its meaning and how it should be defined. As Sumner and Tribe (2008: 10) rightly point out, "it would be an understatement to say that the definition of 'development' has been controversial and unstable over time". There is, as with most 'fields of study', no consensus on an absolute and final definition, only suggestions as to what development may mean in different contexts (Hettne 1995, 2005, 2009).

Similar to previous gatherings, development was a contested concept at the recent conference. The development concept again conjured up a plethora of questions, the core of which aimed to understand why some countries and peoples are wealthy while others are poor. Alternatively stated, why the spread of global wealth has been so unfairly distributed. These questions prompted normative solutions from scholars and practitioners alike. Development is, after all, normative in nature, and if it were not, it would lose much of its practical importance (Abrahamsson 2012). However, herein lies one of the main challenges that we face when we discuss development, namely, the fact that development scholars often conceptualise and define 'development' in radically different and quite often, competing ways. These differences and conflicting views are often based on contested concepts such as 'change', 'progress', 'transformation', 'emancipation', 'integration', 'growth', and 'justice' to name a few.

It is important to emphasise that the many meanings and definitions are not in themselves problematic. The problem lies in the tendency to talk past each other and even create unnecessary and unproductive contestations. These frictions appear to occur from a somewhat weak knowledge about the intellectual history of the field and of different meanings and conceptualisations of development.

Three broad approaches to 'development' dominated the conference proceedings in Gothenburg. These are termed here as (i) the 'classical/traditional approach', (ii) 'the global development approach', and (iii) the 'post-development approach'. We accept of course that by defining development in the manner we do, we are indulging in the creation of ideal types implicitly suggesting that there is a permanent, unbridgeable gulf between these three approaches. In both theoretical and practical terms, they can and do interact, borrowing intellectual baggage from each other. Such interaction and mingling can be stimulating and creative.

## **2.1 The classical/traditional approach**

The 'classical' or 'traditional approach' sees development studies as a new social science discipline (being established after the Second World War), containing a set of theoretical cores: modernisation, structuralism, dependency and 'another development'. This approach is concerned with the particular problem of 'development' in the so-called 'poor coun-

tries' (previously the 'Third World' and now broadly referred to as the South or the developing world). In general, there is not so much interest in complicating or questioning the development concept because the main attention goes to studying the (often material) conditions of poor countries and poor people.

Within this approach, it is possible to make a distinction between those who define development "as a long-term process of structural societal transformation" compared to those who define it "as a short-to-medium term outcome of desirable targets" (Sumner and Tribe 2008: 11). The former is research related and predominantly accentuated by the academic segment of the development community. The latter, on the other hand, is often policy related, evaluative, or indicator-led (for instance, development as defined in the Millennium Development Goals — MDGs) (Sumner and Tribe 2008: 11-14). The policy-led approach also has a close connection to development assistance since much attention is placed on finding concrete solutions and policies to (the lack of) development.

We are genuinely sympathetic towards the classical/traditional approach to development studies, in particular, its focus on development as long-term structural and societal transformation. However, there are some important pitfalls and limitations associated with this approach. Most notable is that the proponents of the classical approach broadly divide the world into two parts: one part constitutes the developed countries and the other consists of 'poor countries'. Scholars of the two other main approaches present at the conference challenge such arbitrary divisions. They argue that the object of development studies, and for theorising, cannot only be a particular category of countries designated as the 'poor countries', regardless of how these are defined. It is precisely this arbitrary division between rich and poor countries that has led to the establishment of the two competing approaches discussed subsequently.

## **2.2 The global development approach**

The 'global development' approach takes stock of globalisation and the transformation of the nation-state. It often criticises the state-centrism and methodological nationalism inherent in much of the classical approach. One of the core assumptions of the global development approach is that development challenges cannot be reduced to a specific

geographical group of countries. In a sense, development is considered a valid concept for the whole world, not only poor countries, and with a universal quality.

Certainly, some classical approaches also emphasised universalism (for example, liberal development economics) or had a global, systemic perspective (for example, structuralism and dependency theory). What is new in the global development approach is that it systematically seeks to loosen up the binary distinction between rich and poor countries by emphasising that the concept of development has universal relevance. "Global implies that a variety of societal experiences from around the world are taken into account", both in the rich world and among poor countries (Hettne 2005: 42). Moreover, global also resonates with transcending classical forms of spatiality (especially the nation-state): "Talk of the global indicates that people may live together not only in local, provincial, national and regional realms, but also in transborder spaces — that is, those that transcend territorial boundaries — where the world is a single place" (Scholte 2005: 3).

A related facet of this approach is that it also seeks to improve the quality of international relations through 'global' cooperation, global (rather than simply interstate or international) governance and the achievement of global and regional public goods. Given that development studies have been so closely linked to the nation-state, some proponents of the global development approach sometimes disregard the classical approach altogether.

## **2.3 The post-development approach**

The third approach, which we refer to as 'post-development', questions the concept of development perhaps more than any other approach and differs radically from most others since it often rejects development altogether. In its most radical version, development is simply a 'meta-narrative' that few take seriously. The mainstay of this approach consists of at least five main criticisms, most of which could also be detected in one way or the other at the conference in Gothenburg:

- (1) The concept of development is problematic because it is habitually defined from outside, especially in the rich industrialised North.

- (2) Development theory and practices are historically rooted in colonialism, and then contain a measure of paternalism, racism, and arrogance.
- (3) Development is Western-/Eurocentric, based on established scientific discourses, and often infused with neoliberal practices.
- (4) The notion of development fails to recognise the intricacies of local conditions.
- (5) Development is problematic because it views the local as passive, inferior, and the object of development (cf Alvares 1992; Escobar 1984, 1995; Nandy 1988; Shiva 1997).

Influenced by postmodernism and post-colonialism, post-development scholars assume that social systems exist of many different groups, and these groups have a plethora of different stories about the world, about their own actions, and their knowledge. These stories are local stories, that is, stories that do not represent the whole, but rather narratives that are limited. Hence, all knowledge cannot be in one place, it cannot be confined and represented in one location, and it cannot be unified. The postmodern condition allows for a multitude of discourses, and these discourses are evaluated and understood differently by different groups. The assumption is that the individual cannot be separated from the social context in which he or she is located (Cilliers 1998).

Post-development scholars do not necessarily reject the notion of change. Instead, they seek to highlight the possibility of change that would "help people to enhance their inborn and cultural capacities: change that would enable them to blossom ... that could leave them free to *change the rules and contents of change*, according to their own culturally defined ethics and aspirations" (Rahnema 1997: 384, italics in the original).

While there were many interesting discussions from all three approaches at the conference, there were also unproductive and even confusing discussions that transpired at times. The latter was most evident when participants failed to recognise the pluralism of development studies and instead favoured one particular approach and definition of development at the expense of the others. Interestingly, both the proponents of the global development approach and the post-development approach revealed uncertainties about the relevance of

development studies altogether, which was evident during the final roundtable discussion.

Closely related to the different approaches were also diverse ways to study and look at the links between North and South, or what the post-development scholars usually refer to as 'Self' and 'Other'. These observations, which we acknowledge are not new, raise an important question about the object and focus of much of Nordic development studies, which is the disproportionate attention placed on Africa as an object of research.

### **3. Africa as an 'object' of Nordic development studies**

Africa undoubtedly holds a special place in Nordic development studies. The continent's oft-cited development challenges — political, social, and economic — has led directly and indirectly to the establishment of several Nordic academic exchange initiatives, research networks, institutions, journals, and university departments over the years. It was evident at the recent conference in Gothenburg that Africa continues to hold a special place in Nordic development studies. No less than 40 per cent of the conference papers dealt in one way or another with Africa specifically, while a range of other papers also involved a strong emphasis on Africa but in more general/global discussions. Present also was the assumption that Africa is the "future of Nordic development studies" as one panellist remarked.

We argue that the on-going and disproportionate attention given to Africa, and perhaps most importantly, the manner in which this is done by some sections of the Nordic development studies community, pose challenges to the future of development studies. We assert that development studies should aspire to be both more global in nature but also reflect more intensively on Eurocentrism and the relationship between 'Self' and 'Other'.

Part of the explanation of why the Nordic development studies community has such a unique interest in Africa lies in the historical commitment that Nordic countries have had towards African liberation struggles *viz* against colonialism and *apartheid*. The strong Nordic support of African liberation from colonial subjugation and the subsequent emancipatory socio-economic development projects that accompanied

these transitions still plays a defining role in the Nordic development studies community. It has resulted in a tendency among researchers and policymakers to get trapped in the conceptualisation of the egalitarian 'Self' and the 'passive Other' (Eriksson Baaz 2005).

The long struggle for freedom in African countries after the Second World War (especially those South of the Sahara) struck a deep moral cord in many Nordic societies. The symbolic transnational relationships between the anti-*apartheid* movement and other anti-colonial movements in the Nordic countries with the liberation movements in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau amongst others, stretch over several generations, not only between the political elite, but also between ordinary citizens (cf Sellström 1999, 2002). Support of these movements was largely a reflection of domestic social democratic values.

The belief that was garnered during this protracted period was that Nordic countries had a moral obligation to extend solidarity beyond their borders to those who are oppressed and disenfranchised. This moral imperative, which was primarily anchored in strong public opinion, was rationalised into official state policies. In Sweden, for example, large sections of the population engaged in one way or another with outreach initiatives towards Africa's plight. From the missionary church and student organisations to trade unions and political parties, like-mindedness evolved in Swedish development aid and solidarity towards Africa. The latter has shaped and guided the ideologies of many who have gone on to be appointed to the apex of the academic and policymaking communities in Sweden.

We argue that despite the many challenges that African societies face, the explicit focus on Africa as a place that is somehow 'special' and that must be 'acted upon' by good international citizens creates a distinctiveness that further pushes the continent to the periphery. As Maria Eriksson Baaz (2005) has persuasively argued, it has also resulted in a significant amount of paternalism in Swedish relations with Africa.

If one marginalises Africa in the international sphere by placing unique attributes to the continent one is not achieving the aim of incorporating Africa's development challenges into the realm of global development thinking. While there are efforts from many camps to increase Africa's agency, there remains a prevalent and highly problematic mindset that outside intervention from altruistic partners is the



solution to Africa's malaise. Moreover, while many attempts are made to bring attention to African voices and local stories (especially from post-development scholars), a lack of African scholarship and attendance is still lacking at these conferences, which, we suggest, exacerbates the problem. As Adebayo Olukoshi argued during the concluding round-table of the conference, African voice and agency are not only needed in practical and ethical terms, it can also feed into a better theoretical understanding of the global condition.

By focusing on the global power relations which the Nordics and Africa are part of, researchers can overcome the outside/inside binary that post-development scholars have been cautioning against. It can also help in bridging global goals and visions on the one hand, and local practices, realities, and conditions on the other.

The so-called 'local turn' in development (and peace) research illustrates how local contexts modify global visions. Local settings, it is suggested, are characterised by immense diversity and modes of life, which raises salient questions about the diverse paths to development. The local turn also provides innovative avenues for a more critical examination of "local agency through a diversity of spheres from the very personal to the transnational level" (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015: 833). The papers and the subsequent panel discussions that dealt with these issues at the conference contributed in a significant way towards a better understanding of local ownership, self-innovation, and everyday practices in a broad range of social spheres. It also provides a framework for bridging the gap between the local and global by illustrating how the former can shape and inform the latter without somehow essentialising it as the 'Other'.

## **4. The future of development studies**

By way of conclusion we would like to outline what we — and many of our colleagues at the School of Global Studies whose views have largely been influenced by the work of Björn Hettne — think ought to be the future of development studies (see Abrahamsson 2012; Hettne 1995, 2009; Hettne and Söderbaum 1999).

As pointed out by Hettne already in the 1990s, we argue that development theory as a state-centric concern today lacks relevance, and, in order to regain its earlier importance, needs to be merged with global and international studies (especially international/global political

economy), which, on the other hand, would be enriched by the more dynamic and normative concerns central to classical development theory (Hettne 1995, 2005, 2009; Hettne and Söderbaum 1999).

Importantly, we do not reject all aspects of classical development thinking, although we strongly argue for the need to transcend it. Certain elements of the pioneering works of classical development theorists, such as Gunnar Myrdal and Dudley Seers, still hold a great deal of relevance — although these theories need to be adjusted to a different world compared to 50 years ago. There is, in our view, no need to abandon the 'modernistic' visions of material and basic needs altogether.

By the same token, although the policy prescriptions and strategies of structuralism, dependency theory, and 'alternative development' reached a dead-end some decades ago, their normative concerns for global disparities in material resources and the political, economic, and social consequences thereof are certainly still relevant in today's world. It should not be forgotten that this body of thought was the frontrunner of the 'global development' approach.

As so strongly and persuasively argued by the post-development approach, we need to avoid several problematic elements of the classical approach, especially the pitfalls of Eurocentric modernisation, 'imitation', 'development as catching up', and various stage theories of growth. Clearly, the future of development studies has to avoid the pitfalls of the universalising assumptions and priorities of Western science. That is, the tendency of convergence around the cognitive model of the West in contradistinction to drawing on the local cultural resources and forms-of-life, the basis on which people read and react to global structural change (Preston 1999: 18), thereby giving shape to different patterns of development.

The new emphasis on culture in development (particularly emphasised by post-development scholars) has far-reaching implications and may constitute the greatest challenge to the rethinking of development theory. It is quite clear that the early and classical development theorists were not self-critical enough on this issue, among other things, neglecting the fact that development necessarily is culture and context specific. Today, however, few reflective social scientists would dispute that social theorising will be significantly marked by the particular intellectual and practical context from which it emerges.

While the post-development approach draws attention to limita-

tions in the study of development and the problematic relationships between the North and the South, we believe that the future of development studies is not to do away with development altogether or to see it as a Western-centric meta-narrative. Instead, it is possible to think of development as part of a comprehensive, integrated, and universally valid (critical) social science, what Björn Hettne previously has referred to as 'global social theory' (Hettne 1995, 2009; Hettne and Söderbaum 1999).

From a global social theory perspective, the research object must be different types of societies in different phases of development, trying to improve their structural position within the constraints of one global world order. This means a revival of general interest in transformation and change, which characterised classical social science — for instance, political economy — but today is based on a broader, global, and culturally more complex empirical experience. In this sense, development studies are of relevance also in the industrial countries, which means that it has gradually acquired an increasingly universal quality, that is, "authentic universalism in contradistinction to the false universalism that characterised the Eurocentric phase of development thinking" (Hettne 1995: 15).

## Endnote

1. The Nordic countries refers to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, including their associated territories (Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands).

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