

The plurality of law and development

Reflections on a field in transformation

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2019-09-25T13:00:34

As a legal field, law and development is often traced back to the movement of US-American scholars and practitioners in the 1960s and 1970s, both epitomized and criticized by David Trubek's seminal article "[Scholars in Self-Estrangement](#)". While this strand remains an important reference, the story of law and development is arguably broader, more plural and more global. The plurality of law and development is marked by a variety of national traditions, intellectual approaches and historical trajectories. A recent attempt to institutionalize this plurality across continents and legal subdisciplines is the [Law and Development Research Network](#), which opens its [fourth annual conference](#) at Humboldt University Berlin today. *Völkerrechtsblog* accompanies the conference with an online symposium featuring participant contributions as well as videos and interviews of keynote speakers. This post reflects on this attempt at institutionalizing plurality in a globalizing research landscape from the perspective of the conference co-organizers.

Institutionalizing plurality

The globalization of legal research has led to an increasing number of international academic networks and conferences. These initiatives tend to focus on specific subdisciplines or regions (like ICON-S for public law, ESIL for international law in Europe etc.). The Law and Development Research Network (LDRN) takes a broader approach, both thematically and geographically: It was founded in 2017 by nine institutions from Africa, Europe and Latin America – and has now grown into a network of 17 partner institutions from around the world and remains open to new institutional and individual members. Thematically, "law and development" brings together researchers and practitioners from various legal specializations and neighbouring disciplines that share an interest in the role of law in development processes – understood broadly as encompassing issues of inequality and poverty, human rights, environmental degradation and social injustice, industrialization and international economic law, or comparative law and interdisciplinary approaches in general. LDRN pools their knowledge to understand better the role that law plays in creating but also in combatting these problems, particularly in the Global South, but also in the entanglements between South and North.

To achieve this goal, LDRN organizes two events per year – a PhD school and an annual conference. Already the first annual conference in 2017 showed a remarkable interest in the field. And this interest has only grown. For this year's conference, we received over 300 submissions from all over the world. As a result, there will be 55 panels and more than 200 researchers and practitioners presenting their ideas. The participants hail from 39 countries, the majority of them from outside

Europe and North America. Among them, 24 are from Brazil, 16 from South Africa, 15 from India, 10 from Indonesia and 8 from Kenya. A majority of them (54%) will be female. We take this massive response as an impressive manifestation of the vitality of the field.

Themes and challenges of pluralizing research

The overarching theme of the conference, the Plurality of Law and Development, is not just an umbrella catch phrase but has a more programmatic meaning. It connects to three particular concerns that are arguably key for globalized legal research: the plurality of voices in the field, the plurality of stories, and the integration of scholarly communities in the field.

The first concern relates to the *plurality* not just of themes, but also *of voices*:

We think it is imperative to finding better answers in our field to pluralize our understanding of the role of law. A central path to that end is to organize a truly global conversation. But such a global conversation all too often fails simply because of a lack of access and resources. In order to do better, we went on an extensive fundraising tour to provide travel stipends for scholars from the Global South. We are very happy that the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAS) generously help us finance over 50 of such travel stipends. Another step to pluralize the conversation lies in geography: the next annual conference will take place in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, which is hopefully more accessible for many scholars from the Global South. A third opportunity for enhancing plurality is offered by new media: Digitalization can expand open access to scholarship and make debates more inclusive, which is our goal with this online symposium and our social media outreach on twitter [#LDRN2019](#).

The second concern in organizing this conference was to highlight the plurality of stories and experiences in law and development scholarship. We think that is equally important to broaden the understanding of where we come from as law and development scholars and what the relevant experiences and histories are in this field. Some complain that there is a bit too much of critical self-reflection in our field and scholarship should be more pragmatic. But for us, the problem is rather that we listen too much to just one dominant story of our field – namely the one of US-academia and US-institutions. There is nothing wrong with being aware of this story – but there are many other local histories and experiences of writing and researching about the questions of law and development in, let's say, Indonesia or Peru, Zimbabwe or Azerbaijan, Brazil or India. Often, finding and considering these traditions requires using a different lens. For example, looking for 'law and development scholars' in India might be disappointing until one realizes that much more work in India has been done under the label of 'law and poverty'. Hence, our Call for Papers asked for these stories, experiences, and entry points to pluralize our knowledge and vocabulary – and invited scholars in particular to reflect on the history of 'development research' (whatever that might be) from their perspective. This includes our own German history, which is the subject of one of the many panels at the conference.

The first two concerns thus have to do with creating plurality. Ultimately, they are an appeal to alter the epistemology of our field. We want to create venues to listen to non-dominant perspectives, to engage with new voices, reject easy transfers – and simply better reflect *what we know from where*. But there is also a third concern that has to do with the already existing plurality of scholarly communities in our field – and with the task of integrating them: As we all know, ‘development’ is an impossible term for many reasons – but it is also a difficult term to circumscribe a field of research. Not only that it is a field with relevant expertise among economists and anthropologists, political scientists and lawyers. Even within legal scholarship, there are many relevant communities that could contribute to a better understanding.

Some scholarly communities are typically identifying themselves as law and development scholars – such as in human rights, legal pluralism or economic law. But other scholarly communities with relevant knowledge are mostly absent. We are thinking in particular of comparative law, which experienced a significant renaissance in the past years, or public international or transnational law. Many scholars in these fields negotiate issues of law and development under different labels and categories, but with very similar methods and sensibilities. These communities are often organized in other networks – and we think it would be productive if we could bring them into our conference and conversations. An important concern for us when organizing this conference was to reach out to various of these scholarly communities and help integrate them into our discussions.

Broader lessons

Reflecting on these concerns in law and development might hold some broader lessons for legal research in a globalized and multipolar world. Pluralizing research requires targeted funding and inclusive spaces for debate to overcome North-South divides. It requires intra- and interdisciplinary openness to break barriers between epistemic communities whose interests overlap in substance. These points are not new but remain as relevant as ever. Another, maybe more subtle challenge that we encountered concerns the notion of plurality itself: Plurality and diversity are complex notions in themselves when practiced in a heterogeneous and globalized field like law and development. There are issues of thematic inclusiveness versus cohesion of the field, but also questions concerning intersectionality, scholarly identity and different ways of representing plurality. With an increasing number of scholars moving between North and South, scholarly identity is becoming more plural in itself. Does nationality and origin matter for scholarly identity and representation, or rather intellectual socialization or current academic affiliation? Is the “Global South” a geographical notion, or does it mainly designate a scholarly sensibility? These questions have many possible answers and negotiating them will be a continuous challenge not only of law and development, but globalized legal research more broadly.

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Cite as: Philipp Dann, Michael Riegner & Thomas Dollmaier, “The plurality of law and development – Reflections on a field in transformation”, *Völkerrechtsblog*, 25 September 2019.

