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Whose Knowledge Counts? Development Studies Institutions and Power Relations in a Globalised World

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Abstract Development studies is an uneasy discipline. It has a relatively short history that is linked particularly to decolonisation and the rise of overseas aid. It is associated almost exclusively with certain geographical locations and a political economy of resource transfer, rather than with a particular body of knowledge or theory. It is thus founded on the very dichotomies it seeks to overcome – of North and South and the massive imbalances in access to resources that produce 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the knowledge economy. This article draws on discussions at the IDS40 Roundtables and conference to outline the key elements of a vision for the future role of development studies institutions which would begin to address these inequities and challenges.

1 Introduction

Development studies is an uneasy discipline. Relative to other disciplinary areas, it has a short history that is linked particularly to decolonisation and the rise of overseas aid. It is associated almost exclusively with certain geographical locations and a political economy of resource transfer, rather than with a particular body of knowledge or theory. Development studies is thus founded on the very dichotomies that it seeks to overcome – of North and South and the massive imbalances in access to resources that produce 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the knowledge economy.

Given this imbalance, it is unsurprising that the notion and practice of 'capacity building', or as it is increasingly commonly termed 'capacity development', is strongly linked with development studies. Currently, around one-quarter of all overseas development assistance is allocated to capacity development (Whyte 2005), and this is concerned not only with strengthening physical capital, but also with developing human

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capabilities (Sen 1999) and strengthening institutions and organisations (Morgan 1998; James 2002). Assumptions about capacity building in development research and practice are rooted in the notion of a flow from North to South and institutional structures reflect this. For example, many institutes and university departments in the North have established clones of themselves in the South. Northern institutions may offer or even insist on their own capacity to build that of others. At the same time, support for capacity development has been and remains one of the key requests from Southern institutions to their Northern counterparts, although this image of a knowledgeable, expert Northern institution dispensing wisdom both about the South and to the South is being challenged increasingly, particularly from the South (Samuel 2000; Klouda 2004).

As an institution, IDS works with partners in the South who have considerable expertise in both development research and capacity development. This raises questions about the disciplinary practice of development studies and about the roles of institutions located in both 'North' and 'South'. In both IDS40 Roundtables and at the anniversary conference, these questions provoked a great deal of discussion.

There was a strong sense that the current development studies paradigm needs to shift, and in particular that there is a need to recognise the changing power relations that determine a more complex and nuanced understanding of development research and capacity development. What then are the implications for institutions in both South and North? These themes are explored further below, drawing on the contributions of Roundtable and conference participants.

2 Whose knowledge counts?

Any attempt to examine the role of development studies institutions, either globally or within specific local contexts, must take account of the changing nature of the global knowledge economy, as this has implications for *what* is studied as development studies, and for *how* institutions position themselves to survive and flourish. With the advent of globalisation and intensified international competition, knowledge has become an increasingly important determinant of the wealth of nations and consequently, access to knowledge and the ability to disseminate it has become a major source of competitive advantage. In some quarters, knowledge itself is being seen as the most powerful driver of social and economic progress in the world today (World Bank 2002). In this vision, tertiary education is seen as 'necessary for the effective creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge and for building technical and professional capacity' (World Bank 2002: xix). Universities, it is argued, should become more innovative and responsive 'to the needs of a globally competitive knowledge economy and to the changing labour market requirements for advanced human capital' (World Bank 2002). Knowledge itself becomes critical to the idea of development as achievement of 'good change', not just in terms of availability, but also in terms of how we use knowledge to understand knowledge.

Knowledge is at times conflated, perhaps dangerously, with information (Taylor and Angeles 2006). Information may be understood as data or sensory inputs that maintain or improve our understanding of the world (Röling and Engel 1991), while knowledge may be considered as the sense people make of information. The process by which this sense is made, and the ways in which knowledge is validated, prioritised and legitimised socially, is a vital consideration and has long been a preoccupation of many writers and thinkers. The distinction between knowledge and information is important, since people throughout the world today are faced by an explosion of information in an ever-increasing range of forms but often with little guidance on how to interpret, use and value it in a critical way (Brookfield 2005). This heightened availability of information gave rise to the notion of the post-industrial 'information society', with a heavy emphasis on the power of new and evolving information and communication technologies. The recent emergence of the idea of the 'knowledge society' (Stehr 1994; Castells 1996; Delanty 2001), which seeks to engage with a broader view of knowledge and information production, sharing and use, offers opportunities to build bridges between the global and the local, a key aim of many institutions and individuals engaged in development studies.

The implications for research and education of these trends in information and knowledge are enormous. From a knowledge society perspective, education will play a vital role in the sharing, application and creation of knowledge (UNESCO 2005). Higher education and universities in particular will, it is claimed, 'fuel the driving forces of the transformation towards a global knowledge society' and have 'a certain capacity to steer and eventually to correct the direction of trends within globalisation' (Van Damme 2002: 4).

But there are other ways of looking at the relationship between research, higher education, knowledge and society. Research and higher education institutions can also be perceived as purveyors of information and generators and propagators of knowledge that fit within paradigms, which themselves have become unreliable and open to question. Universities, whose existence is justified in terms of their contribution to learning, may become weighed down by inertia, unable to learn themselves, or to support the learning of others (Taylor and Fransman 2004). Independent research institutes can be captured by the interests of the clients that fund them and can find it difficult to preserve a space for research that is reflective or challenges the *status quo*. The global knowledge economy has also served to exacerbate concern that some research and academic institutions may be contributing to an *undemocratisation* of society, by discouraging questioning or shoring up assumptions which constrain or block open and reflective dialogue. Additionally, as higher education institutions play a particular role in training educators and developing and updating educational curricula, their increasing orientation towards the global knowledge market may influence the values of basic and critical education, having a much greater impact on development and society in the longer term.

A clearer understanding of how knowledge creation and access to knowledge are changing and where knowledge is being produced is therefore essential. We may note some of the critical elements:

- The combination of an increasingly integrated global knowledge economy with huge disparities in access to knowledge in some respects reinforces (as in the case of the so-called digital divide) and in some respect cuts across North–South distinctions
- New technologies are having a far-reaching impact on how knowledge is delivered and accessed. For example, in the 1990s, more teachers graduated through the Nigerian National Teachers Institute's distance-learning programme than all other programmes in the country combined
- There is a need to understand where ownership of knowledge resources is diversifying, where it is changing institutional form, and where it is concentrating. The current decline of publicly funded higher education institutions, particularly in the South, alongside the rapid rise of private universities and colleges, is a major change. Private universities in the South are often offshoots or franchises of 'public' ones in the North, resulting in unclear distinctions between public and private. For instance, Bangladesh now has over 50 private universities, dwarfing the number in the public sector; between 1995–9, China established 500 new higher education institutions; and much of development-related research and development (R&D) is now carried out by private companies and consultancy firms
- There has been a rise of new institutions in the 'South' which have a comparative, regional and global remit (e.g. BRAC, which started as a national NGO in Bangladesh and now has operations in Afghanistan, East Africa and the UK). This underlines the fact that 'authoritative' development knowledge is no longer the monopoly of a few elite institutions in the North
- There have been major changes in the way that knowledge is used, and by whom. At the national and local levels, there is an increasingly complex interrelationship between local and global knowledge. These include clashes around rights to knowledge, such as debates about 'indigenous knowledge rights' vs. those of multinational pharmaceuticals. But various Roundtable discussions pointed out that sources of knowledge for development problems often come from national sources, rather than international ones.

3 Development studies in the 'South' and 'North'

How are some of these trends affecting Southern and Northern institutions and what do they imply for their respective roles and the relations between them? Many participants in the IDS40 Roundtable discussions commented that research and higher education institutions in the South are perceived differently from those in the North, in terms of their role and contribution to development and in ways that are often contradictory. For instance, they may be seen as:

- 'insiders' or 'outsiders' by different stakeholders engaged in change and development processes
- resource 'sinks' (for funds, materials, bureaucracy) or resource contributors (of knowledge, people, skills and attitudes, networks and partnerships)
- self-serving and self-perpetuating of their own interests (or of other dominant institutions), or as co-learners, collaborators and partners coming together to address common goals and concerns
- contributors to a predefined knowledge agenda, or agents of change and transformation in their own right.

In practice, these are not either/or situations. Research organisations in both North and South will find themselves at different points on such scales, sometimes at several points simultaneously.

Research organisations in the South were also seen to face other difficulties compared with organisations in the North:

- 'Resource starvation' (due in part to shifts in donor funding patterns), which has resulted in shortages of funds, people and information, and has limited the chance for institutes to set their own agenda and use their own approaches to suit their own needs in their own contexts, as well as their capacity to carry out and communicate their work effectively
- A lack of clarity about who they are accountable to, and who is accountable to them
- Problems of staff recruitment and retention, especially as Northern organisations attempt to diversify their staff and international organisations based in national capitals pay higher salaries which draw academics away
- A real and growing asymmetry in the capacity of research and higher education institutions to fulfil their role in society due to structural differences which include power relations with organisations and new academic elites in countries such as India and China as well as with the established elites in the North.

The term 'roadside research' was used in the Kampala Roundtable to describe elite research undertaken by 'favoured' Southern institutions that is seen to simply replicate dominant research agendas. In another Roundtable, the term 'development research darlings' was used to describe those Southern organisations that receive special attention from Northern partners, leading to neglect of others. Such colourful imagery was typical of the depth and intensity of the conversations stimulated by issues of knowledge, power and capacity of research and higher education organisations in both North and South.

Southern researchers also face many of the same issues as researchers in the North. These include the pressures of income generation (deriving from meagre salaries in the South and an increasing move away from core funding towards 'soft money' financing through one-off project grants in the North, the pressure to publish in international journals (deriving from a desire to influence the international agenda in the South and for prestige and funding reasons in North and South), and the difficulty of securing travel funds. There are strong pressures on Southern researchers to publish and travel internationally, regardless of whether they consider this a priority. Universities in South Africa, for example, have been questioning the form of excellence towards which they should strive. As one IDS40 conference participant asked, is it excellence 'in relation to academic standards in the world or to local needs?' Should researchers in the South be striving to publish in Northern-based journals, where currently the voices of Northern-based researchers dominate? And if so, how can they increase their access to these spaces? To what extent does the global domination of a small group of languages, especially English, limit the expression of knowledge by speakers of other languages through international fora?

Who pays for research, and the extent to which this determines political and ideological agendas is a troubling issue for us all. Development studies would wither substantially without the continuing support of bilateral and multilateral agencies but it comes at some price to intellectual and institutional autonomy. One participant asked provocatively whether researchers in the South have become 'agenda-setters or lapdogs'. Linked to this is the issue of transparency, and a reasonable concern that constituencies that fund research can expect greater accountability. But if research agendas in the South are set by funders in the North who tend to privilege Northern institutions and scholars and thus perpetuate asymmetrical power relations, a disconnection between 'donors' and 'beneficiaries' is almost guaranteed.

Increasing privatisation of higher education in many countries is a driving force towards massive expansion of the sector which has positive impacts, but there may be adverse impacts on quality and access as a result. For example, research and teaching are becoming increasingly disconnected (partly for funding reasons). And access to development studies courses in both Southern and Northern universities may become limited to those individuals who can afford to pay through private means, as financial support from traditional funders dries up. Paradoxically, those who wish to study development but come from less affluent backgrounds, indeed from those contexts where struggles for social change are most urgent, may be denied access to the education that could support their efforts to bring about change.

What of development research and teaching institutions located in the North, such as IDS? Does location matter and in what ways, especially in an increasingly electronically connected world? There have been significant shifts of direction over the last decade. One has been the

move from predominantly individual researcher-based projects to much larger partnership programmes involving increasing numbers of organisations in different regions, many of which are not research centres but are engaged in policy, implementation and advocacy and with whom appropriate partnership models are having to be invented. This has been accompanied by efforts to diversify funding sources. A further shift is the rise in importance of providing information services to a global audience. This has, at least temporarily, increased the interdependence between some Northern and Southern institutions.

But institutions in the North will be increasingly challenged to identify their place in the global division of knowledge labour and to justify funding for their operations. One possible scenario is an intensification of efforts to support Southern institutions to acquire the resources and skills they need, and for national institutions to become international players – levelling out the playing field of competition for global resources. Another is a more segmented approach to knowledge partnerships in which institutions in both North and South develop their complementary comparative strengths. And another would be innovative forms of mergers across geographical boundaries where staff, students, and programme managers move either actually or virtually between locations. These are not mutually exclusive options.

These IDS40 discussions signal some key concerns. First, as well as the huge imbalance between North and South, the resources (and hence power to influence) available to research and higher education institutions in the South are also very unequally distributed (often concentrated in capital cities for example). Second, those resources may not be used to generate learning and knowledge that benefits society locally as well as globally, but rather to further the agenda, beliefs and paradigms of institutions situated elsewhere. This view is reinforced by a growing perception that the forces of globalisation are channelling the voices of the world's citizens into ever narrower spaces. Many feel that the influence of increasingly powerful economic, cultural, social and political ideologies is becoming the mainstream.

Those who think and see the world differently are finding it harder to make their voices heard except in alternative fora such as 'blogs' (Taylor *et al*. 2007; Taylor and Angeles 2006). Third, this is reinforced by the dependence of development studies in both North and South on short-term funding and from agencies which drive the agenda, however well-intentioned they may be. Finally, the raison d'etre and role of development studies institutions based in the North is under scrutiny as institutions in the South challenge them on the same terrain and take an increasing share of global funding.

4 Towards a different vision: beyond the North–South paradigm?

The issues raised above have far-reaching institutional as well as epistemological consequences, and may well be shared more widely beyond those who engaged in the IDS40 conversations. Development

professionals and practitioners who participated shared a deep concern for creating capacity to undertake what is most needed within a local context, as well as contributing to global knowledge on key development issues. Drawing on the different sources outlined in this article, the following seem to be key elements of a vision for the role of development studies institutions which would begin to address the many inequities and challenges we have raised above.

Realising this vision poses challenges for institutions and organisations in both North and South. Challenges encompass the changing nature of the global political economy of knowledge, the type of knowledge that is generated, the extent of autonomy of knowledge production and the way knowledge is delivered.

- In a globalised world, we need to pay attention both to the globally integrated nature of current development issues (migration, structural determinants of poverty, the rise of major non-OECD players, etc.) and to geographical and contextual differences and the local solutions that respond to these. We therefore need comparative development research, rather than Northern institutes focused on the South or even Southern institutes focused on the South

- The highest priority must go to redressing the huge imbalances in access to knowledge resources of all kinds. This means intensified efforts to identify capacity gaps and develop strategies for addressing them

- Capacity development is a mutual process. Transfers of learning are required in multiple directions and both 'inside' and 'outside' knowledge have a critical role to play. This means recasting one of the dominant frameworks of development research as the valuable (and valued) perspective of the outsider rather than the (unequal) perspective of the Northerner on the South

- In a highly commoditised knowledge economy, institutions must be able to create and preserve autonomous spaces for work which challenges orthodoxies – wherever they originate.

There are enormous complexities in achieving any of this and there are no quick fixes or ready-made solutions. We conclude with some thoughts on the major challenges and opportunities ahead, particularly for the creation of new institutional forms and partnerships for development studies.

4.1 What institutional arrangements would reduce inequalities in knowledge production and access?

As we have noted, there has been a shift towards larger, multi-partner programmes and ways of working. This is encouraging but current modes still substantially reflect leadership from the North and 'partners' in the South. These may be seen as a transitional phase but we need to pay increased attention to how partnerships are being shaped and

transformed by research needs, the rise of Southern institutions with regional and international capacity, and trends in funding. Because they are intrinsically outward-facing, development studies institutions are in a particularly advantageous position to innovate in terms of partnerships and organisational arrangements.

4.2 Re-orienting the subject matter of development to a comparative perspective

There is a long tradition of comparative research which has crossed the North–South divide but it has been a subordinated one in a context where 'development' and 'South' have been yoked together.[1] And it has even more rarely involved the comparative perspective of researchers from the South engaged in research on the North (except informally as students on courses) or doing comparative work in other parts of the South.

Resource and funding constraints have militated against this but theoretical boundaries have also contributed to marginalising these other perspectives. This is beginning to change – organisations such as BRAC are turning their attention to generalising the learning from poverty reduction in Bangladesh to other parts of the world. But it will require a concerted effort to change the current structure of incentives in institutional remits, financing, careers and dissemination to encourage a more widespread shift. On the part of institutions this will also entail reviewing and renewal of intellectual traditions that are valuable to understanding the world. On the part of funders, it requires an imaginative shift in thinking and is perhaps a role best played by a major foundation. At the same time, such a shift should not devalue the importance of national and regional perspectives and the role of institutions which can articulate them.

4.3 What should Northern and Southern institutions do similarly or jointly and what should they do separately?

Addressing this requires a candid assessment of where interests coincide and where they diverge. In practice, both competition and cooperation will delineate relationships and this is probably all to the good provided the uneven terrain in which they presently operate can be changed. Common interests certainly include shared intellectual perspectives and exchange, as well as opportunities to learn from different 'insider' and 'outsider' understandings.

While one possible scenario is that Northern institutions disappear eventually as capacity in the South renders much of what they do redundant, the value of development studies expertise in all countries should be insisted upon. In the medium term, it will remain important to retain independent institutional voices in the OECD countries on national and regional policies and programmes which affect 'developing' countries. And in the longer term, a renewed tradition of development studies 'beyond the North–South paradigm' will be needed more and more to tackle the complexities of our fractious, interconnected world.

Note

1 Exceptional examples at IDS include Naila Kabeer's research comparing Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and in London; Linda Waldman's comparative study of asbestosis-affected workers in South Africa and the UK, and a study comparing parents' understandings and concerns about immunisation in the UK and Africa by Melissa Leach *et al*.

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