

## Doing Development Research in Asia. Problems and Perspectives

by

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KEYWORDS. — Globalization; North and South; Symmetry; Solidarity; Relevance.

SUMMARY. — Because the notion of ‘relevance’ is deeply context-bound, I argue that we need to broaden our understanding of development to include ‘conditions for development’. In this paper, I reflect on the well-known adage about ‘giving a fish’ and ‘teaching to fish’ by adding the following: ‘create the conditions for fishing, we will fish forever’. At the beginning of the 21st century, which is also an era of rapid globalization, I reflect on (a) what it means to speak of development work; (b) in a continent like Asia, which has emerging industrial giants like China and India, both of whom know extremely lopsided development. Within this framework, I think about what it means to speak of developmentally relevant research. Without losing sight of the hard-won understanding of developmental work acquired over the decade, I plead that we look at development as a multi-layered process. If we do so, we can appreciate the fact that different kinds of research are relevant at different levels: what is relevant at one level need not be relevant at another. Thus, criteria for developmentally relevant research will have to keep these different levels separate from each other. To answer the four questions posed by the task force, I suggest that we split the global problem about ‘developmentally relevant research’ into three tractable sub-problems, each of which gives a different answer at an appropriate level.

### 1. Introduction

When we talk of development studies, we tend to speak in terms of some kinds of social scientific research on the one hand and their possible ‘relevance’ to developmental work on the other. Not every kind of research in and about the developing world is of relevance to developmental work. Even when the study and understanding of a theme is of great importance for developmental work, not every study on that theme is of ‘relevance’ to developmental work. For instance, not every study on political corruption is relevant. This is not surprising: the notion of ‘relevance’ is extremely context bound. Consequently, when we speak of ‘development studies’, we need to be very clear about both the levels and the contexts to which such studies should be relevant. That is to say, we have to clearly spell out not only the contexts in which some kinds of research are developmentally relevant but also the levels at which they are relevant. This means that development itself is a multi-layered process or at least that our *conception* of development should be multi-layered. What does this mean?

### 2. An Old Adage Expanded

Consider the well-known and well-worn saying about development: “give me a fish, I will eat for a day; teach me to fish and I will eat for my life.” This statement talks about two

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different processes: the first process is about charity; the second is about transfer of skill and knowledge. I suggest that these two processes form the first two layers (or levels) of developmental work that are well-known to all of us. Today, in the period of rapid globalization, we need to add a third layer (or level) to this process: “create the conditions for fishing, we will fish forever”. Before expanding on this line of thought, let me see whether we can speak of relevant research for the first two layers.

### **3. The First Level of Development Studies**

For developmental work which involves charity, the kind of relevant research is obvious: *one which identifies conditions of catastrophe that cannot be addressed without outside help*. Such conditions might involve situations of war, natural disasters, massive displacement of people and such like. Or, it could also involve the spread of life-threatening diseases like AIDS or cholera. Here, developmental work might involve outright charity or address itself to remedying or strengthening local institutions to meet the perceived threat. A developmental response could be reactive or pro-active: neither makes a difference to the kind of research required at this level. Maximally, one could also think of research that is like an autopsy: detailed analyses of what went wrong in any given situation of providing help. For instance, research into Tsunami help in Indonesia and Sri Lanka can tell us what went wrong but it cannot do more than this. Such research cannot yield us with policy suggestions for developmental work, even though it might suggest that some aspects should be taken into consideration more explicitly.

### **4. The Second Level of Development Studies**

For developmental work that involves transfer of skill and knowledge, the situation is less clear. On the one hand, surely, for any kind of developmental work to take place in a country from the South, there must be a need in that country for such an activity. The developmental research required in this case is clear: *to show the presence of such objective needs*. On the other hand, today, one is inclined to add the additional requirement that the need is also explicitly expressed: that is, the notion of ‘partners in development’ equates the presence of needs in any given situation with the presence of the desire (among the local population) for such a transfer. This makes the issue very cloudy: what would constitute an expression of desire? An opinion poll or a questionnaire set up to test for the presence of ‘felt needs’ or, wrongly used as an approximate synonym in this case, the presence of ‘desires’? This muddleheaded thinking cannot generate any clear policy for developmental work. It has a very wrong anthropological picture of human beings: *it confuses between needs and desires* and postulates a very faulty psychological picture that the needs of human beings somehow translate themselves into desires and motivation. Not only that. It implicitly presupposes that (a) people in a culture have some kind of a consensus about what development means; (b) they know what is required for this purpose; (c) they merely lack the required resources (knowledge, skill and money) to bring about such a development. Under this interpretation, this second layer collapses into the first: developmental work becomes mere charity, even if the notion of ‘partners in development’ is meant precisely to prevent paternalism in developmental work. Using a different idiom, one could say that the dominant picture about development, which suggests that developmental work responds to felt or expressed needs, is just about as workable as a business model which says that market exists only for products that are in demand. Should mankind ever have followed this wisdom, we would never have progressed beyond our primitive existence: every product we need today did not exist before such products were invented and desire for these

products were socially and culturally induced in us. If we use this analogy, we might as well say that induced desires become needs instead of needs expressing themselves as desires. If we accept this truth about us, developmentally relevant research should incorporate these two dimensions and exhibit them: (a) *the presence of objective needs*; (b) *identification of the mechanisms to transform such needs into desires*.

## **5. The Symmetry between North and South**

Notice that the kind of developmental research required for these two layers can be undertaken by anyone, whether the person is in the North or in the South. This is possible only because 'development' concerns us all equally, whether we are in the South or in the North. Surely, this is one of the lessons that the contemporary economic crisis has taught us: globalization affects us all equally, even if there is a differential impact in different parts of the world. Both the South and the North have equal stakes in the development of the South and, as such, have the same kind of voice in the process. As I see it, 'equality', in this context, means that we are governed by the same rules or that our roles exhibit symmetry. The symmetry is also moral and ethical in nature. People from the North have a right to demand that the South develops and impose a moral obligation on people from the South that they develop; the people from the South have the right to develop and impose a moral obligation on people from the North that they help in this process. This is what, I think, the notion of 'solidarity' means in the global context we all share today. *There is symmetry in the rights and obligations between the North and the South today*. This point brings me to what I want to focus on in the rest of the talk, namely the emergence of a third layer in developmental work.

## **6. The Need for an Asian Policy in Developmental Work**

Let us first take note of the state of (most) countries in the Asian continent. On the one side of the spectrum, we have industrialized countries like Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. On the other side, we have countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam and Pakistan. In the middle of the spectrum, we have the rest: from China to India, each at a different stage of development. From one perspective, a country like China is 'rich': today, it is lending staggering amount of money to the most advanced country on this globe, the USA. It is making heavy investments in many parts of the world, from Africa to Latin America. From another perspective, this growth is lopsided and more than a third of its population is mired in poverty and is living below the poverty line. This staggered and uneven development characterizes a host of countries in Asia: from India through Indonesia to Malaysia. The trickle-down economic effect of industrialization is noticeable only when viewed against a picture from the sixties: however, if we look at their problems today, including social, political and cultural problems, they are every bit as mammoth as the continent itself. Furthermore, if we take into account that they are peoples coming from a non-white, non-Christian culture, clearly any developmental research has to first spell out an 'Asia Policy'. Such a policy must accommodate itself to the fact that most of Asia suffers not only from the ills of the past (massive poverty, illiteracy, etc. induced by centuries of colonization) but also from the diseases from the present (massive social disruption arising from rapid industrialization). When we look at the countries in the Asian Continent today, then, we must look at them neither as European Nations nor as industrialized 'modern' countries but as countries that are doing their best they can to cope with problems that are every bit as gigantic as the continent itself. We have to look at them with compassionate and understanding eyes and not with eyes either tinged green with jealousy or

made yellow by prejudice. The economic and social inequity in India, for instance, is not a proof of the failure of her economic and social policies any more than her information technology and engineering industry are proofs of her strength. India is an emerging world power in the complex combination that she is now because of which she will pursue a road of her own for tomorrow. In other words, we need an 'India policy' (and a 'China policy') and an 'Asian policy' today. We cannot develop such a policy by merely 'applying' or modifying an existing policy for dealing with an advanced industrial country (say, the US or Japan) or a developing country (say, Malawi or Bangladesh).

### **7. On the Third Level in Developmental Work**

It is in such a context that the third line of the adage becomes extremely relevant to us: "*create the conditions for fishing, we will fish forever*". Developmental work in Asia, today, has to extend beyond both charity and transfer of knowledge and skill, if, indeed, we are concerned about where more than bottom third of its population finds itself in and also what ails the rest of the population. Economic poverty characterizes these countries as much as social upheavals and cultural dislocation do. Rapid disintegration of social cohesive bonds and family life are as much problems for developmental work here as is the absence of necessities of life. If we add the fact that four nuclear powers (China, India, Pakistan and, recently, North Korea) inhabit this region in countries that are undergoing rapid and violent disintegration of social and cultural life, it is obvious that we can only ignore developing a coherent 'Asia Policy' at mankind's peril.

How can we do this? Here, we see the need to add a new layer for the notion of developmental work and for encouraging relevant developmental studies. Development in Asia requires, above all, *a reproduction of the conditions of existence of these societies and cultures*. What do I mean?

### **8. Developmental Studies in the Era of Globalization**

Every society has some conditions of existence: to name a few, they are economic, political, social, technological and cultural in nature. If it is to be a stable society, these conditions are also conditions for its stability. In any dynamic society, these conditions are reproduced internally; that is, each stable and developing society has an internal dynamic that assures that these conditions of existence are reproduced. Here we can think of two kinds of reproduction: a simple reproduction and an extended reproduction. In any simple reproduction, which merely reiterates the prevailing conditions of existence, say, for example, poverty, hunger and disease, there is no possibility for development. It is a monotonous or simple reproduction. Any development requires extended reproduction, whether the extension is either positive or negative. Zimbabwe (of today) is in the grips of a negative extended reproduction, where impoverishment is both horizontally extended (where more and more people become poor) and vertically deepened (there is a continuous diminishing in the necessities of life). However, the structural reasons of Zimbabwe are not present in Asia. Here, we need a horizontal extension and a vertical deepening that is positive in nature. In other words, any developmental policy in Asia will have to *ensure an extended reproduction of the conditions of existence of these societies and cultures*.

What does it mean to speak of such an extended reproduction? Here, we already see what kind of developmental research is needed: *one that identifies such conditions*. Such research is

both scientific, because it provides us with understanding of human societies and cultures, and developmentally relevant, because it helps create such conditions.

Consider the first two layers of developmental work: charity and transfer of skill and knowledge. The third layer reproduces *these two as the internal dynamic in the South itself*. That is to say, it involves institution-building because it is institutions alone that can guarantee the reproduction of conditions of existence: *the North participates in either building or sustaining institutions that enable the extended reproduction of the conditions of existence* of these societies and cultures. Which are those institutions? While developmental work can focus only on *civil institutions*, no such condition applies to research: developmentally relevant research *identifies and analyses the working of institutions as they contribute towards an extended reproduction of society and culture*. In other words, development studies should analyse how institutions contribute to the third layer of developmental work.

The institutions in the North, as I see it, have an additional responsibility in this situation: *to promote this kind of research in both North and the South*. That is to say, the North should build innovation and incubation centres that not only analyse but also stimulate autonomous extended reproduction in the South. This suggests that the North should actively build and sustain universities, research centres, academies and such like in the South.

Let me summarize: even at a gross level, we can identify three layers of developmental work. Under certain conditions, they all reduce to the first layer: charity. Each of these three layers continues to have relevance to all of us. Any relevant development study will have to be defined with respect to each of these layers. With these points in mind, we can now answer the questions that the organizers raise in very simple terms.

## 9. The Questions Answered

The first question: *How do we define development research?* There are at least three kinds of development research as they relate to the three layers of developmental work. (i) Research which *identifies conditions of catastrophe that cannot be addressed without outside help*; (ii) Research which (a) *demonstrates the presence of objective needs*; (b) *identifies the mechanisms of transformation of such needs into desires*; (iii) Research that *identifies and analyses the working of institutions as they contribute towards an extended reproduction of society and culture*.

— The second question: *What is good development research?* A good development research goes further in that such research is able to *specify (a) the conditions for an extended reproduction of societies and cultures*; and/or (b) *the conditions and modes for institutional interventions for development*. For each of the three levels, the nature of good development research will amplify on these two criteria.

— The third question: *How can we recognise a good researcher potentially contributing to development? Who are the researchers who deserve to be supported?* These questions are formulated in a person-dependent way. If we translate the answers to the second question on a case-by-case basis, I think we can arrive at workable decisions in a concrete way.

— The fourth question: *What should we do so that countries in the South themselves produce the best possible research useful for their development?* We need to actively develop the third layer of development work and the associated research: *create and sustain institutions that strengthen indigenous dynamic of extended reproduction*. I also further think that we need to appreciate that our current notion of ‘solidarity’ implies that we accept that *both the South and North have symmetric rights and obligations*. This implies that the North has the

onus to promote developmentally relevant research of the required kind both in the South and the North; the South has the obligation to participate in this process.