Understanding development(s):
Development of understanding?

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*Development studies has weathered many storms, ever since its appearance in the late 50's or in Belgium since in 1961 the Louvain Institute was created. The question is whether the present context and concepts are adequate for the task. Conceptually, the effects of the globalisation debates have changed notions of North vs. South, with the emergence of pockets of rapidly increasing wealth in the traditional South and poverty in the North. Globalisation, the debates around it and the concepts to analyse the respective phenomena lead to a questioning of the relevance of development studies. On the basis of current work in the field of 'science and technology for development' it is argued that novel relations are emerging and novel policies required. The linkage with policies is likely to be affected by the fragmentation and possible demise of neo-conservative thinking which has dominated US policy-making and thereby influenced international agencies, as evidenced in recent work by Francis Fukuyama.

Argument:
1. Development studies: part of the problem?
2. Changing global settings: an S&T perspective
3. Great Transformation in higher education
4. Development policies: beyond neo-conservatism
5. Global interdependence and the (under-)development of understanding

1. Development studies: part of the problem?

Our Development Community celebrates significant moments these days. The Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex just celebrated its 40th anniversary; the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes last year commemorated its 25th year and the Institute of Social Studies of The Hague did the same for its 50th anniversary in 2003. Times of joy – times of reflection. The Louvain Institute is no different: 45 years of productive existence with valuable contributions to the field of development studies; celebrated in Gembloux, that home of great minds who inspired researchers all over.

Allow me to reflect for a moment on one great mind which has affected the thinking of my generation. A maverick mind, not at home in the narrow walls of academia, but rather in the openness of what we call “the field” – in Dutch “het veld, het open veld”. A mind of European stature and upbringing, rooted in the Baltic, working in Africa, his home base right here in Gembloux. A man whose work was so advanced that it did not get the attention in the 1950’s or 1960’s, yet was re-edited many years afterwards. His name: Pierre de Schlippe, who published in 1956 his seminal study in English on the Zande system of agriculture. Known as the founder of Ethno-Agronomy a field that has since profited from researchers like Paul Richards and Robert Rhoades or researcher-policymakers like Louise Fresco.

De Schlippe gave a framework for my own work on experimenting cultivators or knowledge networks and I am therefore greatly indebted to this thinking. He combined love of working in the field with a capacity to engage in debate with policy makers and academics. Although some of his views on community development may now look dated, his stature as one of the formative minds in agricultural development studies is unquestioned. He argued, in fact for development of understanding as a
precondition for understanding development. He first wished to make Belgian colonial administrators aware of the Zande Shifting cultivation system before they had an opinion on how to change that system. Of course he got into conflict, and of course policy makers knew better at the time; yet the fact remains that his studies still inspire, and we look with a sense of embarrassment at the colonial views of the time. “Vive Pierre de Schlippe” is therefore my motto – read him again, be aware of the pioneering work in agro-development studies and be proud of his work on understanding development; be just as critical of conceptions which do not stand the test of time. We all struggle for the development of understanding as a precondition for understanding social change and development, especially in schools of doctoral studies like the one we are celebrating in the Louvain Institute of Development Studies. This also explains the title of my lecture: Understanding development – Development of understanding.

The question is, however: how relevant is our understanding of development for the management of social change? After all, De Schlippe did not just want knowledge for knowledge’s sake; he wished to do something with it. Or do we? Has development studies grown into a field of studies that is only to be judged by the academic standards it has set for itself? By, for example, the number of publications in respected international (read: North American and British) journals? Or do we judge our relevance by the value of our contributions to those engineering social change through enterprises, civil society organisations and public administration? If so, what is the opinion of those colleagues in the global South that we aim to assist?

In September 2006 IDS celebrated its 40th anniversary with the theme Reinventing Development Studies. It had invited English-speaking scholars from the Global South and North to critically evaluate where we stand. The results were intellectually exciting, but worrying for the field of development studies. One speaker Shalmali Gut tal (Senior Associate, Focus on the Global South) concluded that our field is –in the words of yesterday’s emancipation movements – rather part of the problem than of the solution. Conference organiser Laurence Haddad concluded:

Are we continually talking to ourselves? Shalmali Gut tall said we do this too much – and because of this we have an incredible ability to absorb failure with few incentives to learn from our mistakes. The ability of citizens to give us feedback as researchers is weak – a less bounded landscape with more co-creation of knowledge projected into a public space will certainly improve our accountability to those outside of the academy. We also do not talk enough to those in powerful positions – the media, the private sector, the military. We also do not do as good a job as we think we do in connecting with individuals and groups without power.

Michael Edwards, the astute observer of global civil society, added: “development and foreign aid are too strongly linked together to be easily separated, so […] now is surely the time to replace this frame with a new vision for development studies.” If Edwards, Gut tall and Haddad are right we indeed face a problem: our discipline may be on the verge of irrelevance. This may be due to the central notion of “development”, that we cherish “which according to some Southern observers, implies a paternalistic conception of managed social change based on post WW2 Northern optimism regarding newly independent countries. It may also be due to relations between researchers and policy makers which are “too close for comfort”, meaning that development studies has become the handmaiden of powerful institutions at the international, regional and national levels. We have therefore lost our independence, or innocence, in the eyes of Southern beholders. And, finally, it is possible (or even plausible) that we simply live in a world which has changed so
rapidly that we need to re-calibrate our concepts to better understand the developments that are shaping our realities. I argue that all three are relevant and that, therefore, it is better to go “beyond development” and attempt to coin concepts which can stand the test of ‘hard currency’ in the business of global (ex)change. Surely a Doctoral School like the one we are presently celebrating, should be up to the task of doing so.

Conclusion: development studies will increasingly be part of the problem if we do not open up, especially to novel global realities. As a field we need to move beyond the discourse of development and coin a currency that stands the test of time. We can learn from people like Pierre de Schlippe that it takes an independent mind and a lot of conflict to develop such understanding.

2. Changing global settings: an S&T perspective

The era of the 1990’s has been the era of an emerging globalisation discourse. Surely globalisation is not something of this period, since it can safely be argued that De Schlippe’s colonial world was in certain respects more globalised than the present one. And, surely, much of the academic work on globalisation built on concepts and theories developed earlier, like the notion of Modern World System developed by Wallerstein and his colleagues. Yet the discourse received an impulse from the sudden decline of East-West rivalry and the disappearance of a Third Way of the self-proclaimed Non-Aligned. World conferences were the amplifiers of the new wave of globalism, be they on the environment (Rio, 1992) or on social development (Copenhagen, 1995). A World Economic Forum brought private sector leaders together in the luxury of Davos, soon to be followed by a World Social Forum in the modest surroundings of Porto Alegre. New academic Journals, like Global Environmental Change (1993), Global Governance (1994) or the Global Journal of Engineering Education (1997) saw the light. Authors arguing the case for global approaches became celebrities overnight, like from the anarchist left Negri and Hardt, the liberal right Fukuyama (1992) and the far right Huntington (1997).

The upshot is a radical transformation of reality, and the discourses to understand our realities. The mentioned authors could become celebrities overnight because we are startled about what happens around us. International forums like WEF and WSF attest to the confusion. Whereas the former started as a fairly clearly focused meeting of entrepreneurs, it ventured into general issues, thus losing focus; the latter started as a clear reaction on WEF through movements like ATTAC, articulated by the liberal left in Le Monde Diplomatique and is desperately searching its identity after a number of successful but rather non-focused conferences. Both events need critical focus and invite people like Huntington to criticise “Davos Man” or Negri linking his critical views on ‘global civil society’ in Porto Alegre. To what extent do development studies contribute to an articulation of the global debates?; do researchers like Nobel Prize Winner Joseph Stiglitz influence the WEF debates or the WSF ones? I would argue, that on the whole the contribution of traditional development studies has been marginal and that we should draw the consequences as an intellectual community. Guttal and Haddad might just be right: we are too much turned into ourselves. We need to turn our discipline inside out.
Take the area of science and technology which has been at the heart of development studies and the related policy-area of development cooperation. The United Nations started its development programmes around technical assistance, it created special institutions for it (UNU) and programmes in other member institutions (UNIDO, UNRISD, UNDP). Recently the UN has included technology transfer in its Millennium Development Goal 8. What can we say about developments in science and technology and how does it relate to the discipline of development studies?

Changes in the field are so rapid that we hardly have terms to describe and analyse them. What to say about the fact that a developing country like India (HDI Rank 127 in 2005) topped the world in terms of software-exports, surpassing the combined software exports of the next 10 countries? What to say of biotechnology developments in Singapore (HDI rank 25 in 2005), which has become the most aggressive investor in Asia in this field? Surely biotech and ICT are the two most dynamic fields of the 1990’s and subsequently. Or what to think of Brazil (HDI Rank 63 in 2005) world leader in coffee and sugar, but also alcohol and fruit juice, which is preparing to become the breadbasket of the world through agro-technological development, and preparing to be the bio-energy exporter by the same token? Is the North-South paradigm of development studies still relevant or has reality moved beyond the concepts that we are trying to describe it with?

The 2001 Human Development Report presented a new image of the global science and technology scene. Of course the traditional dominance of the US centres was reconfirmed, yet new so-called hubs (or regional centres of technological innovation) appear, like the cited ones in South Asia (Bangalore), South East Asia (Singapore), and Latin America (Brazil).

Science and technology are interesting indicators of global development for two reasons:

- science has had a global orientation ever since it started
- science and technology are perceived as drivers of global developments, like in the area of ICT.

It is therefore interesting to see what developments are taking place, such as the ones mentioned. What can be said about science and technology for development (STD), especially from the policy vantage point? After all, if the field of development studies is action oriented, policy must be a significant factor. Allow me to draw on the conclusions of a recent book that Rutger Engelhard and I published Science and Technology Policy for Development: Dialogues at the Interface (London, Anthem Press 2006). Our principal conclusion: an eclectic mix is needed of approaches to STD, which require an open mind to see the new realities. For it just may be that new epistemic communities are emerging, setting new agendas following new criteria; it just may be that scientific production in certain areas will move geographically away from the North Atlantic and that it involves increasingly regional hubs along the Indian Ocean, the Pacific or indeed the South Atlantic. Maybe patents will not be the dominant form of Intellectual Property Rights in fields like the tropical seed industry. And may be, just may be, social scientists will devise new toolboxes to achieve relevant policy dialogue between traditional producers of knowledge (like cultivators) and traditional users (like researchers). That is quite a long way removed from the present situation in which Northern scientists or their institutions patent innovations leading to technologies which can be exported to the Global South.
Yet there are indications that this is the case. Sunil Mani argues that the Singapore miracle can be understood in terms of a small but highly coherent epistemic community. “Epistemic communities are like-minded networks of professionals whose authoritative claim to consensual knowledge provides them with a unique source of power in decision-making processes.” (Thomas 1997). The notion is based on pioneering work by Ernest Haas (1991) who was impressed by the rapid creation of consensus in a particular area of environmental studies. Apparently, small countries can make huge advances in a relatively short time-span provided they ‘get their act together’ and find the fortunate mix of governmental measures, private investment and some degree of public support.

Such advances do show up in scientific output statistics. Take co-authorship of scientific articles, which can be taken as an indicator of participation in global knowledge networks. Caroline Wagner has compared the relevant data for 1990 and 2000 and finds that indeed a global divide existed in 1990. A decade later, however, she notes the emergence of regional networks centred around certain hubs. Whereas in 1990 most Southern co-authors were directly associated with Northern researchers, she shows that by 2000 Southern regional networks were emerging. Wagner (2006: 174) concludes that the traditional National System of Innovation approach has become irrelevant. International cooperation in science and technology leads to research that “is networked, spans disciplines and political borders, and includes participants from different sectors.” Add to this the flow of traditionally Northern researchers and companies to the new hubs like Singapore and a totally different picture emerges.

Intellectual property rights are likely to change. Bert Uijtewaal, a plant breeder working for a multinational company indicates that new forms of property right may need to be developed when working in advanced biotechnologies for tropical agriculture. He describes the case of genetically modified cabbage and cauliflower to reduce the dramatic growth in pesticide use in Southeast Asia. To cut a long story short: the seed company wishes to distribute the technology for free, provided the national government involved (India) is willing to provide adequate legal safeguards against misuse. The strategy proposed therefore involves both public and private stakeholders, as well as civil society representatives. Personal communications from the director of the company indicate that he proposes breeder’s rights as a better solution than patents, since the former allow a dynamic knowledge network – the latter would stultify technological innovation.

In conclusion: if people like Juma, Mani, Uytewael and Wager are right we need to adopt different concepts for a different reality: the soft web of informal global relations may well be governing the relevant social transformations. The soft web that binds Singapore’s epistemic community, that emerges in Wagner’s regional knowledge networks or that links Indian cultivator knowledge to a transnational enterprise like Uytewael’s.

In Calestous Juma’s words “Major changes have taken place in the so-called developing countries in the last decade” and “public policy plays a much greater role in technological innovation than is generally acknowledged.” Gone are the days that public policy was out and all blessings were expected from entrepreneurs enjoying the free interplay of market forces. Neither is there a return to yesteryear’s industrialisation models. Rather, a new picture emerges in rapidly growing
economies, notably of serious public investments in infrastructure, small and medium enterprise development and public support for knowledge-based institutions.

3. Great Transformation in higher education

Allow me to just dwell for a moment on Juma’s latter point: public support for knowledge-based institutions. A curious paradox emerges: whereas various countries in the Global North are stabilizing or reducing public investments in higher education, and expect private investment to take over, rapidly growing economies in the global South appear to be doing the contrary. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (1993) have cogently argued in favour of the capability development; hubs like Bangalore and Singapore appear to be gathering the profits.

Elsewhere, I have therefore argued that a Great Transformation in global higher education appears to be taking place. The terminology is borrowed from Karl Polanyi, that great Central European observer arguing against undue dependence on market forces in the understanding of social transformation. Instead he called for the embedding of economic relations in social realities and based his arguments on a wide variety of examples including traditional societies or 19th century Europe. I (Box 2005: 1) tried to show that “The world of higher learning has changed more over the past decade than it has over the past century. It is now more international than it has been for centuries. The university, once anchored in the nation state, is increasingly international in character, and higher education is one of the sectors that is globalising most rapidly. Globalisation processes have their own dynamic, generally associated with the emergence of new market-structures and a different role for the State and for public interest institutions based in civil society. “

I argued that the Great Transformation in higher education has drastic consequences for International Education and for institutions that are associated with it, such as Institut d'Etudes du Développement. If we are to reap the benefits of half a century’s investment in human capital and institutional development, a drastic transformation is called for. But in the process, a uniquely efficient and effective form of international cooperation can help maintain diversity in a globalizing system of higher education. Your Ecole Doctorale is such a form of efficient and effective international cooperation, just like the ones at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague or the one at the Institut d’études du développement at Geneva University. Make this argument to government officials and they look askance. Political lip-service for the Knowledge Society is high, corresponding budgets are low. Compare European outlays for biotechnology training with the ones of the new leaders like Singapore and the startling result is that we do not invest. It is exactly in research centres and doctoral schools that these striking contradictions appear. The conclusion of this observation can be brief: public underinvestment in science and higher learning in Europe does not augur well for its competitive capacity in the next decade. In Sunil Mani’s terminology: where is the European epistemic community that learns from Singapore? Are there signs that prevailing socio-political models need drastic updating, especially in the area of international cooperation and higher learning?
4. Development policies: beyond neo-conservatism

Yes – there are. Again, allow me to take just one example from the United States. We may well be facing an intellectual turn-around among policy circles in that country, which has immediate effects on international development cooperation. The prevailing model in the US has been the present administration’s neo-conservative one. It is based on a singular mix of early 20th Century philosophies (Leo Strauss), late 20th Century realities (US dominance) and the decline of multilateralism (as argued by Huntington and Kaplan). For a review see the provocative work by Francis Fukuyama (2006: esp. Ch.2). He argues, on the basis of the book *L’Amerique messianique* by Alain Franchon and Daniel Vernet (2004) that neo-conservatism has had its time and a new socio-political model is called for. Fukuyama (2006) bases his argument on the total failure of the Iraq war, which he sees as the immediate result of neo-conservative thinking in the Bush Administration. With it came a world view centred around US values, a reaction against multilateralism and a peculiar form of social engineering to achieve American aims: ‘benevolent hegemony’. This approach failed and therefore, Fukuyama argues it needs to be replaced by a new form of multilateralism. Not one centred on the United Nations with its labyrinthine formal institutions, but rather by the realisation that over the past half century a new web of rather informal international institutions has sprung up. In Fukuyama’s words:

*The solution is not to strengthen a single global body, but rather to promote what has been emerging in any event, a "multi-multilateral world" of overlapping and occasionally competing international institutions that are organized on regional or functional lines.*

Fukuyama contrasts the formal institutions of yesteryear with the informal web of relations that appears to be guiding social transformation. As a neo-liberal he of course stresses the relations between entrepreneurs, which are less guided by legitimate formal institutions like the UN, and more by effective informal ones like codes of conduct; less by intergovernmentalism than by coalitions of the willing, be they public or private. Surely the formal institutions are transparent, accountable and based on state sovereignty and therefore legitimate, but they are out-competed in global social transformation by flexible and fast informal institutions that may be less accountable and less legitimate non-State actors.

Granted, these thoughts are not new. The already cited Michael Edwards has taken up many of these notions in his books on an emerging global civil society. What IS new, is the link to a recipe for a new US foreign policy beyond neo-conservatism. It also contains a lesson for development studies: if even realistic dreamers like Fukuyama plead the case for new forces of global social transformation on the basis of informal networks, it may be that we need to rethink our basic concepts. In Edwards' terms at the recent IDS Conference:

*A shift away from conventional thinking would generate a better understanding of causes and solutions since they are increasingly integrated across borders and disciplines, and revolve around common if differently-experienced patterns of change and the capacity to control it.*
5. Global interdependence and the (under)development of understanding

My plea has been for a different tack in our discipline or rather: in that uncanny mix of social science disciplines that is known as development studies. My strong feeling is that since the 1980’s we have been led by a central notion of development that has made us more part of the problem, than part of the solution. Our close association with development policies, our links with foreign aid, with formal bilateral or multilateral institutions, has made us suspect to colleagues in the global South and may have made us lazy intellectually.

If the new interdependencies create new forms of social organisation and social transformation, we need to base our arguments on them. If people like Edwards and Fukuyama are right, we need to look at new forms of global interdependence with new tools. We need to recalibrate our concepts of yesteryear to make them in tune with the realities we face. Take that basic notion of state sovereignty, which forms the foundation for disciplines like law, public administration or for that matter international relations. But what does it mean at the very time that in the UK a British colonel stands trial under the ICC Statute for crimes against humanity? Imagine, that epitome of state sovereignty, the British army … and one of its senior officers tried according to an international statute. A statute, that of course was rejected out of hand by the neo-conservative Bush administration as being anathema to the US Constitution. A statute, by the way, that came about exactly through those soft informal networks, led by non-State actors like Amnesty International. It became International Law not through bilateral treaties, not through multilateral agencies like the UN, but basically through what I call civilateral prodding: the force of soft power by global citizens who forced national governments to sign the Rome Treaty which led to the ICC.

My contention is therefore that sovereignty does not reside exclusively in the State any more – it resides in new legitimate social formations which guide global social transformation. Social formations like the ICC which is significantly different from that other court in the Hague, the International Court of Justice. The new one is based on a vast social movement among global citizens, unified in a coalition which led to the Rome Treaty, allowing a British colonel to be tried in his home country. The old one is based on the system of state sovereignty, which only allows the ICJ to settle cases between States, not individuals, and almost only to the extent that the States cooperate. That is a sea-change – that is a major difference in legitimacy.

With the ICC a new era is starting in international law, but just as well in international relations. A new paradigm has emerged. Gone are the days that states exclusively defined public interventions at the international or global level. States share the global space with non-State actors that weave the fine webs of power and legitimacy that brought us the ICC, the Anti Landmine Treaty, the global support for Kofi Annan’s continuous fight against the US administration’s crusade against the UN, as in the battle for the MDGs. Whatever one’s intellectual reservations may be against the MDG’s – the one thing which is clear to me is that those who did not want to have them included in the 2005 declaration were not in tune with those new webs of legitimacy that I have tried to sketch.

It is against that underdevelopment of understanding that I feel we should take a stand as a community of scholars. We need to take issue, show the case for the new global interdependencies on the basis of an emerging global sense of citizenship. This goes way beyond the traditional notion of development, way beyond the dichotomy of
North versus South, way beyond the simplistic models of sustained economic growth or democratic political maturity that were argued in the 1990’s. It takes critical social scientists that dare face social transformations with the only tool they have: original reflection on the basis of consensual evidence to guide effective interventions which aim at tackling social problems. Social scientists like the ones in this Institut d’Etudes du Development and especially the ones in that laboratory of social transformation, the École doctorale en Études du développement and its doctoral researchers.

Be inspired by great social scientists of the past like Karl Polanyi, or Pierre de Schlippe – use their professional example to guide you – but especially: be inspired by that magnificent task which lies in front of you, the understanding of that Great Transformation which is taking place right under our eyes.

*Lecture given at the occasion of the opening of the École doctorale en Études du développement, Gembloux, Belgium on 4-10-2006. Louk Box is rector of the International Institute of Social Studies and professor of International Cooperation at Maastricht University.

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