

# Water Under Troubled Bridge: The (Ir)Relevance of Development Studies Pedagogies in African Universities

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Jonathan Makuwira

## Introduction

It is with great honour and privilege that I stand here to share my thoughts on one of the most critical issues in academic field – Development Studies. I must admit right from the outset that while I stand here to acknowledge my academic promotion, the theme I have chosen is of great importance to me personally and, I sincerely hope, to many of us gathered here and all this evening. Growing up in a village South East of the Southern part of Malawi; in a very poor family, I never saw it coming that one day, I will have the privilege to talk to a critical mass of intellectuals, development practitioners and, let alone, in country like South Africa. It is within this context that before I proceed, I want to acknowledge with all humility and sincerity, the contribution many prolific scholars, to this field of scholarship. I also want to pay respect to all the great giants of this country, irrespective of race, ethnicity, political and religious affiliation, on whose shoulders I stand to see the horizon of renewed hope.

As we all know and have seen, the recent events under the movement “*Fees Must Fall*”, have shaken academic institutions here in South Africa. This movement has now become viral. As I speak, Malawi, my own home country, is also embroiled in a similar situation where the University of Malawi and its constituent colleges, are closed down due to a hike in tuition fees (Milanzi, 2016). In South Africa, while the issue has multiple dimension, the nature of the issue is defined by many demands which have put the university in an alert mood despite the current agreements. One of the demands is of great importance to my lecture this evening:

Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure - through addressing not only content, but languages and *methodologies of education and learning* - and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience (Rhodes Must Fall Statement, 2015, quoted in Oliver, 2015, p. 9).

The demand for “*methodologies of education and learning*” is very significant in the current *FeesMustFall* discourse. This is not just because it is necessary to consider education methodologies, but in the broader scheme of things, it is also a call to both mental and ideological transformation. It challenges university lecturers and educators alike to question their own preconceived pedagogies and engage in an introspection - a

reflective moment in their teaching. I will come back to this later in my presentation. The point I am trying to emphasize is that the call for “*The-Fall-in-Fees*” is a development issue. It is a development issue because it gravitates around access to [Higher] education. We just need to remind ourselves by what Nelson Mandela once said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. We all know-education is a fundamental human right; so too is development (United Nations, 1986). The denial to education is an act of injustice. But like Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Luther King Jr, 1963). In this regard, there is a lot of development injustice to which my lecture this evening alludes to.

### **Water under Troubled Bridge**

I have titled my presentation “Water Under Troubled Bridge: The Ir/Relevance of Development Studies Pedagogies in Africa Universities”, in order to express a long-held concern in this field of academic scholarship. Many scholars such as Michael Edwards (1989, 1994), Giles Mohan and Gordon Wilson (2005), Ong Liu and Sarmila Sum (2007), Jonathan Langdon (2013), just to name a few, have made a significant contribution to this debate and I want to acknowledge their critical articulation and concerns. I am particularly indebted to Michael Edwards’ work on this theme to which I add a different spin by focusing not on how relevant or irrelevant development studies pedagogies are to the NGO sector but to the teaching of development studies as an academic discipline. In Africa where Development Studies as an areas of academic scholarship remains nascent, the need to engage in constant search for new innovation in teaching the field, cannot be overemphasised. Langdon (2013) indicates that it is only when we continue to build and add to a critical mass of voices and ideas which others have already started, that clarity will begin to emerge as we seek new forms of decolonising pedagogies in the field of development studies.

My lecture is organised into four sections. The first section introduces, very briefly, the concepts of development, development studies, and development studies pedagogy by illuminating competing perspectives that have underpinned the development industry. The second section examines the role of universities in contributing to development. In particular, it is in this section that I argue that an Africa university should be a breeding ground for propagating principles, ethics and values of social justice. The third section articulates the issues of relevance in the teaching of development studies. This section dwells on how knowledge is created and recreated in development studies. It is in this section that I tease out the dominance of Euro-American development studies knowledge through, for example, research and research outputs – essentially how research findings are disseminated through journals dominated by authors outside the developing world. The fourth and indeed the last section, offers an examination of the field and departs from the conventional ways of teaching to propose a kind of pedagogy which radicalises the way development studies is taught. By ‘radicalising’ I mean not in a violent manner but taking a complete departure from the conventional teaching methodologies in development studies. I am proposing the use of “The Pedagogy of Discomfort” (Boler, 1999) as a way of discovering a new terrain and energy to teach what Huish (2013) calls

'dangerous knowledge'. I conclude by arguing that given that development is a political process loaded with power dynamics, teachers of development studies need to crack out of cocoon of comfort and reassess not only their pedagogical philosophies but also to be conscious of their positionality and its effects on development studies graduates.

### **Development, development studies, and development studies pedagogies**

Development, as we understand it in the modern era, connotes so many things to different contexts within which it idea is used. In fact it is a problematic concept given its historical origin. Attempts have been made to provide a conclusive definition of the idea but, to date, this attempt has ended in theorising development variously with the following as considered some of the meanings:

- Long-term progress of human condition towards a good life.
- Intentional change (Hettne, 2008)
- Freedom of choice (Sen, 1999)
- Human wellbeing for all (Chambers, 1989)
- Reduction in poverty, unemployment and inequality (Seers, 1969)
- Needs satisfaction, indigeneity and self-reliance, environmental harmony and structural transformation.

By looking at these definitions, one can easily conclude how complex development as an idea is. By inference, these definitions help us also to understand how challenging development studies is in its attempt to respond meaningfully to teaching this complex academic discipline. Furthermore, the definitions also provide us with an opportunity to raise questions about how 'development' has been framed and reframed over the years and how, today, it shapes the way we perceive the world. Not only do these definitions help us to question and make critical observation about the agencies of development in terms of *who* says what about development and *how* do they talk about development, but these varied definitions help us to take note of the positionality of the agency - *where* the agency is speaking from.

To date, the study of development has, by and large, been a study of 'the other' – the study of the South by the North; of the village by the city. Increasingly this study of the South has been conducted under the guise of 'partnership' with the South, but still, largely, coordinated by the North. This approach has led to an increased perception that problems are the domain of the South and solutions the domain of the North.

If indeed development is broadly understood as described, what then is development studies? To answer this question, I want to join colleagues such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012), Petit (2006), Summer (2006), Summer and Tribe (2008) and other scholars, too many to acknowledge, whose arguments about the role of development studies offer a sobering reminder of the complexity of development studies. In a nutshell, development studies did not emerge out of a vacuum. While it emerged in response to issues raised above, and as well as it is well-intentioned, it also emerged with its own ideological tone which, from an African standpoint, raises the question of relevance. It is particularly so today when after almost eight decades of foreign development assistance (FDA), in other

words, development aid, to many African countries in the name of development, poverty still remains a challenge. Across Africa, universities are busy offering development studies programmes both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels; producing many graduates who are employed as project and/or programme managers. However, it is said that 7 out of 10 projects fail (Ika and Saint-Macary, 2014; Davies, 1997). No question is asked about the relevance of development studies programmes in Africa or as to whether something is wrong with development studies pedagogies. Neither is there a critical examination of the framing of the idea of development studies itself from the global North. This silence is significant in my lecture this evening as I will show why it is relevant to develop a sustained conversation on development studies pedagogy from an African university. Whatever the case is, development studies, according to Summer and Tribe (2008, pp. 35-36), is about three things:

- Development itself (structural change, short to medium-term outcomes of desired targets; as a dominant discourse of Western modernity);
- Cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural; and
- Instrumental and interested in knowledge creation.

It would seem narrow to me just to focus on three themes. Perhaps, I would need to add, from my own personal experience and understanding that development studies must go deeper to appeal to human agency – the heart and soul of what makes us humans. By this I mean that development studies should delve deep in helping people to come out to face the realities of life, raise an awareness of self-consciousness – a change in the way individuals should define themselves amidst the challenges of not only themselves but others too. In the words of Currie-Alders (2016), at its core development studies combines both concern over the existence of poverty within society (the have-nots) as well as quest to understand and shape how society changes over time. Unfortunately, the current development studies prioritises one set of knowledge (Northern) and excludes, devalues and undermines valuable learning across a range of development stories, North and South. It also tends to lead to the conflation of development and development assistance.

As a point of departure and perhaps in getting to the core of my presentation, “shaping how societies change over time”, is the purpose of development studies pedagogy. I must state here: development studies pedagogies as a vehicle through which development studies lecturers in colleges and universities communicate, are not in themselves the end. As a ‘means’, a pedagogy, according to Alexander (2004, p. 11), is “what one needs to know and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted. Therefore, development studies pedagogy should be seen as a process of learning in which the learner not only interprets and engages in critical development debates but also be able to draw on their own personal experiences which, in the broader context, are informed and enriched by socio-cultural worldviews. For those who find themselves at the centre of facilitating this learning process, there is need to take heed of the fact that teaching is never free from power dynamics. Hence, development studies pedagogies need to be understood and applied within the context of culture, self-identity, the influence of power and other worldviews (Bourn, 2014).

## **The African University (Africa scholar) as a Bridge in Trouble**

As stated in the introduction, the recent trend in student protests in many South Africa Universities as a result of fees hikes, lack of on-campus accommodation (high cost of off-campus accommodation), and the broader call for the decolonisation of the African University curriculum, is a testimony to a call for a new era of transformation. As I write a conference on “Decolonising the University in Africa” has just ended at the University of South Africa. Such a forum is an attempt to bring together intellectuals and various voices and to ultimately engage in a new thinking about the role of an African University. These voices, which call for a deeper interrogation of the role of the African university today, has not just emerged out of a doldrums; rather these are the voices that have been simmering for a long time. They are voices which also depict a change in power dynamism. If the university today was conscious of its social obligation of facilitating social change, then the current outcry would be celebrated as an achievement because of this student consciousness of noting some inadequacies in the current university pedagogical architecture.

## **Decolonising development studies in African universities**

There are two major parallel events taking place in the transformation of the Africa curriculum/university. The *FeesMustFall* movement and the other to which this presentation centres, is about “decolonising development studies” (Langdon, 2013) or what Mazibuko (n.d.) calls “Africanising development studies”. It is the decolonisation of development studies that I want to dwell on. Why is there a push to decolonise development studies in general and, more so, in African universities? The answer to this rests with the failure of development itself.

For almost 7 decades of aid to Africa, development on the continent has been ambivalent. According to the Moyo (2009), Sub-Saharan Africa has been a recipient of aid totalling \$866 billion since the 1960s. For example, it is estimated that Sub-Saharan Africa received almost \$57 billion in development aid in 2013 alone. Yes, Sub-Saharan Africa has made some notable gains over the past 50 years. For example, since the mid-1980s to 2013, the number of children in schools has increased from 40 per cent to almost 75 per cent, while poverty rates have fallen from 58 per cent to 43 per cent and, lately, foreign direct investment has gone up from \$15 billion in 2002 to \$46 billion in 2012 (Ika and Sait-Macary, 2014). While there have been all these gains, it also observed that the number of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 288 million people in 1990 to 389 million people in 2012, representing almost 35 per cent increase (World Bank, 2016, p. 59).

A recent study examining aid inflows into and out of Africa has revealed that Africa has inflows of \$134 billion every year (Sharpes, Jones and Martin, 2014). But out of this figure, it is estimated that \$192 billion goes out, leaving a net loss of \$58 billion every year. According to the findings, most of the loss is through profits made by multinational companies; debt payments, often following irresponsible loans; illicit financial flows

facilitated by the global network of tax havens; in foreign currency reserves given as loans to other governments; illegal logging; illegal fishing; migration of skilled workers from Africa; climate change adaptation; low carbon economic growth. These huge inflows of money, some of which comes in the form of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), means high levels of presence of donors on the continent whose interests are totally different from that of the Africa governments. Yet despite all this irrefutable evidence, there very little interrogation on the link between these losses and how academic institutions can expose such malpractices to our students.

According to Eneh (2009) and Ika (2012), Africa, over the past eight decades, has heavily relied on project management to achieve its development goals. Yet during the same period of time, development planning has resulted in brilliant, impeccable, colourful, and well-written development visions, policies, programs, plans, and projects. But Eneh and Ika point out that Sub-Sahara Africa is home to many abandoned, failed, or poor performing projects which have thwarted development initiatives. These observations are consistent with Davies' (1997, p. ix) observations when he noted: "Eight out of every ten development projects fail! Why? Is it so difficult to plan and manage a project successfully? Or were the groups who undertook the project ill-prepared? The answer is partly both" (Davies, 1997, p. ix). Very recently (see Seitz, 2013), one German development diplomat has echoed even more disturbing revelations:

Wouldn't it be important to know why three out of four development projects in Africa fail? If it is not possible to finally assess this objectively, a passive mindset and a small financial elite will continue to prevail. In many parts of Africa, there is a lack of action to the benefit of society and real supervisory bodies monitoring representative democratic structures. There is no fundamental review of concepts and there are no adjustments being made to the contents due to the lack of studies on the impact of development aid that has been delivered for decades.

This is only development as understood a from project management perspective but there are other critical issues that need to be understood as well.

While some of the development indicators point to an improved progress in broad terms, development on the continent has been uneven due to was, politics, geography and inequality. Some of the issues which have precipitated a call for the decolonisation of development studies in African universities include, although not limited to the following:

- Development studies has not taken post-colonial critique seriously and, therefore, has not generated enough alternative avenues suitable for Afrocentric development studies paradigm.
- There is much emphasis on managerial content in development studies at the expense of teaching activism and solidarity which are essential in challenging power dynamics and elitism in the development process or when it comes to negotiating policy shifts.
- There is a gap between theoretical knowledge and the manner in which we can teach how to respond to development needs (interventionist approach).

- Lack of deliberate initiatives to create a conducive environment for students to discuss and reflect on development processes.
- Pedagogical approaches with an emphasis on Northern template in teaching development studies in African universities rather than a combination of both Western and Indigenous epistemologies.
- Validation of development studies knowledge – most of the African development studies scholarship hardly finds its way into the most popular development studies journals in the world (only 15% of the journal articles published in the top 10 development studies journals are by scholars from the developing countries and perhaps much fewer if this is narrowed down to scholars from Sub-Saharan African universities).
- Preservation of Western knowledge and ideology in academic scholarship.
- Poor linkages between development studies departments and development organisations (academic institutions and practitioners).
- Disjuncture between development research, development practice, development policy and development theory.
- Technocratic participatory approaches which insidiously allow local elites to control local communities.

These factors not only call for a reconceptualization of development studies pedagogy but also the question of relevance. Furthermore, while we do so, we need to ask three critical questions: who initiates what is relevant? Who defines relevance? Relevance for who? To answer all these questions, my focus is the “Teacher” or in academic terms, “University Lecturer”.

The first entry point in dealing with relevance or to expose what is irrelevant, from a pedagogical point of view is to pose four important questions:

- To what extent do development studies pedagogies help to develop a connection between local and global political economy and, subsequently, link these to the concerns of poverty, social justice and solidarity?
- How far do development studies pedagogies help in recognising the link between the history of colonisation, and global divide and the implications these two issues have on African societies, economies and cultures?
- To what extent does development studies pedagogies move beyond teaching about charity but help to develop a better understanding of social justice?
- How do the current development studies pedagogies help develop critical thinking, reflection and challenge students and teachers alike, to engage in personal transformation?

These questions help us to not only understand the link between development studies content but also the choice of the kind of teaching strategies we can engage in our teaching, particularly from an African perspective. This takes me to the next argument – development studies knowledge.

## **The relevance/irrelevance of development studies knowledge/content**

The nature and the choice of development studies pedagogy is, to a larger extent, determined by knowledge or the content. I will address some of these below:

The *first* of these of these is what I call *Framing*. In development studies the manner in which certain words and/or concepts are presented matters most. On face value these may appear very innocent but when you apply a critical lens, we are bound to uncover the subtleties that may have profound impact on societies. Let us take, for example, the notion of “participatory development” which is a very popular concept in development practice yet when you look at the levels of participation, what is common is the use of the lower level of participation where those engaged are passive or often used to rubber-stump what is already decided elsewhere. In this case participation is often hijacked by the (local or international) elites. This can result in disempowerment.

The *second* aspect is what I call *Ideology*. Development studies as a field is an ensemble of ideas and ideals. Some of these beliefs often magnify particular philosophical orientation. Take, for example, Marxism, structuralism, modernism, capitalism, socialism, just to name a few. All these are ideologies that are informed by a set of ideas and ideals which, ultimately, result in a theory to which those of us in academia associate with. It is our association with these theories that will dictate the kind of pedagogical tools to teach particular topics in development studies. Very importantly, ideologies can turn out to be a space for contestation and preservation if it serves the interests of one group over the other. A good example is capitalism which, if analysed from an economic growth lens, simply means creating incentives for entrepreneurs to siphon away resources from unprofitable channels and into areas where consumers most highly value them.

The *third* aspect is about *Inclusion/Exclusion*. The outcry for decolonising the curriculum is, in actual fact, not just about what is excluded, but also what is included. It is about what is included in the dominant development discourses and what is also excluded in those grand narratives. Which is the reason why it requires a particular pedagogical approach in order to expose the weaknesses of particular ideologies and why they (ideologies) are maintained through amplification of certain “*voices*” at the expense of others. In such a scenario, the preservation of a particular development ideology serves the interests of the “other” (the *privileged*) and suppresses and often oppresses those on the periphery of society.

## **Relevant pedagogies in development studies in African Universities**

Africa is diverse. It is a continent whose history, culture and politics defy ordinary understanding. It is therefore advisable not to take a ‘blanket’ approach in choosing pedagogical tools. However, considering the state of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, development studies teaching needs to open up spaces for critical conversations. For this to be done, I want to propose the use of three pedagogical approaches.



### *Pedagogy of Discomfort*

First used by Megan Boler (1999) in her seminal work "*Feeling Power*", pedagogy of discomfort has never been used in development studies. I propose this pedagogical tool for three main reasons. First, pedagogy of discomfort allows both students and teachers to engage in critical conversations that destabilise and challenge their preconceived ideas about development so that eventually they can come out of their 'comfort zones' and embark on a journey of self-reflection and transformation. Second, given that development processes thrive on power dynamics, the use of pedagogy of discomfort helps to question cherished beliefs which in development processes can be counterproductive as often development practitioners tend not to listen. Third, pedagogy of discomfort helps to transform teachers and students to learn to unlearn certain behaviours that are counterproductive to social transformation.

While this approach has been questioned on the basis of its ethical application (see Zembylas 2015; Evits, 2009; Zembylas and McGlynn, 2012), it holds some space in development studies given its focus on critical examination of self before others.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

While not new to educational studies and in research, Critical Discourse Analysis is rarely seen as a pedagogical tool, especially in development studies. Why is this suited to development studies field? Like pedagogy of discomfort, CDA as a teaching strategy would aim to delve into understanding how social relations, identities, knowledge and power are constructed through written, spoken and symbolic texts in development studies (Foucault, 1972; Fairclough, 1992b). Critical discourse analysis can be effective in deconstructing meaning behind spoken words in development processes. It can unsettle dominant voices and power dynamics. It can uncover subtle behaviour of development stakeholders. It can help us understand privilege, exclusion, and inclusion. For example, engaging CDA in policy analysis can help uncover whose interests are served; who is excluded and whose voice is suppressed and whose voice is amplified.

### *Study Tours*

For a long time, teaching development studies is often dominated by theorising content rather than interpreting it. Study Tours have been used the world over but, perhaps with little innovation. There is renewed thinking in approach to this as a teaching and learning tool in development studies (Nadarajah, Makuwira, Kambewa and Nagalingam, 2016; Makuwira, Nadarajah, Kambewa and Nagalingam, 2016). Development studies is rich with theoretical books but lean on lessons from the field. Over the years, development studies programmes across the globe have not utilised field work as a teaching space, hence leading to producing graduates who are ignorant of the tension between theory and practice.

In 2013 the RMIT University and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and natural resources undertook a study tour which resulted in a publication where students, after two weeks of field visits, reflected on development themes and put together book chapters. The conversations between students from Australia, Malawi and lecturers from Sri Lanka, Malawi and Australia, was invaluable enriching. Of particular importance was how development as a concept was reconceptualised and knowledge was generated. It is through such critical and often explosive conversations that students and teachers were able to navigate new terrain of understanding the theory and practice.

## **Conclusion**

While development studies as a field of study in African universities continues to gather pace; and the need to decolonise the field in order to reflect African ideals, the question of relevance has created a new layer of critical inquiry. My presentation has touched on a number of issues but, as a matter of emphasis, the university in an African context is under strain to reform, to decolonise, and to provide space for context-specific conversations relevant to Africa. This call, in tandem with the #FeesMustFall movement, have put the role of universities into question. These parallel movements are a fertile ground for reconceptualising development studies pedagogies in Africa. This call rests squarely with lecturers who, I consider to be the real bridge which is in trouble because of its failure to come out of their comfort zones and confront the realities of life on the ground. The contradiction of the uneven development trajectories in Sub-Saharan Africa speak for themselves that development has failed and we need to be asking questions as to whether or not the academy is party to Africa's dismal performance in development terms or it is due to the fact that we are not conscious of the dominant narratives that dominate development studies curricula.

As we seek alternative pedagogies, I argue that there is need to engage in research into teaching and learning in development studies. To date, there is very little research that delves deep into what kind of pedagogical approaches are effective in teaching students to become responsible custodians in their communities and households. Unless we (institutions of higher learning) crack out of our cocoons of comfort and realise how much damage we are inflicting on the field of development studies, development in Sub-Saharan Africa will remain stagnant and we will continue to chant the same song that that seven out of ten development projects in Africa fail.

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