

Introduction: Reclaiming Development Agendas

*Peter Utting*¹

Peter Utting (ed.), *Reclaiming Development Agendas: Knowledge, Power and International Policy Making*, 2006, Palgrave Macmillan. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

This extract is taken from the author's original manuscript and has not been reviewed or edited. The definitive version of this extract may be found in the work *Reclaiming Development Agendas: Knowledge, Power and International Policy Making* edited by Peter Utting which can be purchased from www.palgrave.com.

Introduction: Reclaiming Development Agendas

Peter Utting

‘The distribution of wealth is closely correlated with social distinctions that stratify people, communities, and nations into groups that dominate and those that are dominated. These patterns of domination persist because economic and social differences are reinforced by the overt and covert use of power’ (World Bank, 2005).

‘.... we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. [E]very form of society has been based ... on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes’ (Marx and Engels, 1848).²

About This Book

Judging by the similar tone of the above quotes, the language of leading international development organizations appears to have taken a radical turn of late. Features of such changes in mainstream discourse were, in fact, discernible in the 1990s when various actors and institutions reacted to structural adjustment programmes and other features of economic globalization and ‘neoliberalism’. Following a series of civil society mobilizations, institutional initiatives and high profile reports—for example, the 50 Years is Enough campaign³, the World Summit for Social Development⁴ and other UN summits, and the annual publication of the *Human Development Report*⁵—

terms and concepts like ‘poverty reduction’, ‘rights-based development’, ‘good governance’ and ‘empowerment’ emerged as new mantras. Furthermore, international development agencies began positioning themselves as ‘knowledge agencies’⁶, attempting to enhance their role as intellectual actors and to be more responsive to ‘local knowledge’, the ‘voices of the poor’⁷, and the needs and realities of developing countries.

The World Bank, in particular, has changed its tune, toning down its blind faith in market forces, acknowledging the need for more proactive approaches to deal with the social and environmental costs of market liberalization and economic ‘reform’, upgrading the role of state, and emphasizing the importance of ‘social capital’⁸ and redistribution⁹ in well-functioning markets and societies. As a corrective to forms of technocratic governance and policy conditionality that characterized the design and implementation of structural adjustment programmes, consultation and decision-making processes related to economic and social policy are said to be more participatory, and locally and nationally embedded. Such is the case, it is claimed, with the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) promoted by the World Bank.¹⁰

Why are such changes occurring? Is the uptake of progressive buzzwords reflected in meaningful policy change? Are discursive adaptations and policy and institutional reforms likely to improve the prospects of the world’s poorest nations and result in patterns of development that are more inclusive and equitable? This volume addresses these questions by examining the determinants of changes in the discourse and policy of multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and the inter-relationships among knowledge, power and policy making. The contributors also

assess the potential and limits of what has been called ‘the new development agenda’, and identify crucial elements of alternative approaches that might enable less powerful countries, actors and institutions to reclaim development agendas. The authors include leading thinkers on development issues, several of whom have played a prominent role in international organizations and social movements. They focus, in particular, on the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) and certain bilateral agencies, as well as specific themes and issues, including poverty reduction strategies, gender equality, education policy, global social policy, and institutional innovations associated with ‘knowledge agencies’. What emerges is a powerful critique of contemporary ‘development-speak’ and policy, as well as important insights into alternative strategies.

Understanding the Knowledge-Policy Nexus

Scholars associated with various liberal, realist, and institutionalist schools of thought have long been engaged in a heated debate about the dynamics of policy change and the relative importance of interests and ideational factors, or agency and structure (Cooper and English, 2005; Ruggie, 1998). This literature provides numerous pointers to explain the role of ideas, institutions and power in shaping the new development agenda, as well as what we should make of the changing language of development and the emergence of ‘knowledge agencies’.

Liberal and more recent ‘constructivist’ thinking tend to place greater weight on the role of ideas, norms, values, identities, ideology and agency (Weiss and Carayannis, 2001). Reflexivity and ‘social learning’, and the age-old process of rational problem

solving that is a feature of modernization, suggest that policy analysts, technocrats and other decision makers will attempt to understand and respond to complexity, risk and uncertainty, and are eager to learn from best practices, as well as from past mistakes and failures, and to adjust policy accordingly (Heclo, 1974; Hall, 1993). New thinking and particular concepts are thought to stand a better chance of filtering through to policy makers because of institutional developments occurring at national, regional and global levels, such as networking, partnerships, multistakeholder dialogues, and the strengthening of so-called epistemic communities that facilitate links between professionals/scientists, activists and decision makers (Haas, 1989; Ruggie, 2003). Consequently, policy change results increasingly from ‘communities of shared knowledge and not simply domestic or transnational interest groups’ (Haas, 1989). Furthermore, the technical nature of certain bodies of knowledge increases the influence of new social actors, namely ‘experts’, in the policy process. Some strands of discourse and institutional analysis suggest that discourses ‘do more than just get in the way’ of institutional change; they, too, can be reconstituted and facilitate political and institutional change (Dryzek, 1996).

Various schools of thought related to realist and political economy traditions tend to emphasize aspects associated with societal pressures, power relations, structural factors, and the interests of particular actors and institutions, which largely determine the course of events, as well as the ideas they espouse (Cox, 1997). Changes in international development discourse and policy are often seen as a reflection of changes in the balance of social forces. Accordingly, what is needed for world development is not so much a ‘rearrangement of knowledge [as] a realignment of power’ (Nederveen Pieterse, 2005). From this perspective, contemporary adaptations

in discourse and policy are responses to periodic crises (for example, financial), social and political pressures emanating from the perception or reality of the developmental failures of neoliberal policy and ‘corporate globalization’, as well as from heightened global awareness and activism associated with poverty, human rights and North-South inequality. The potential and limits of policy change are often explained with reference to the ways in which powerful actors and institutions respond to societal pressure, systemic threats and policy failure in order to reassert their dominance, control and legitimacy (Escobar, 1995). And they are likely to mould or ‘frame’ issues in ways that are compatible with their world view and institutional mandates and cultures¹¹ (Bøås and McNeill, 2004).

Both post-modernist and certain political economy perspectives have highlighted the political and ideological underpinnings of development ‘narratives’ and policy prescriptions, and the selective uptake of information and evidence within bureaucracies and policy making circles (Lewis et al., 2005). The social construction of knowledge about development can be viewed as a battlefield¹² between actors and institutions with different world views. Knowledge processes do not simply involve information flows between producers of knowledge, disseminators and utilizers, but complex ‘interaction and dialogue between specific actors’ with different ‘life-worlds’ in which ‘discontinuity rather than linkage, and transformation not transfer of meaning’ are key (Long, 2002:274). Through such processes, the analysis of development problems is often depoliticized in the sense that it is disconnected from political and structural realities, and alternative or radical ideas are diluted or neutralized. Gramscian analysis introduces an important variant by emphasizing that powerful interests and institutions have the capacity to take up progressive concepts

and agendas as part of a hegemonic project that can accommodate oppositional views. The relative mix of ideational factors and societal pressures in policy change may also vary considerably depending on what aspect of the policy regime is being challenged or reformed, and the extent to which policy makers 'are armed with a coherent policy paradigm' that, to some extent, can shield them from societal interests (Hall, 1993). In this light, the frequent shifts in international development discourse and policy may be a sign that the dominant neoliberal paradigm is in crisis.

A number of currents and circumstances have come together to explain the depth of contemporary interest in the relationship between knowledge and policy making. In addition to the traditional debate that has preoccupied social scientists as to the relative roles of ideas and interests, or agency and structure, in processes of change, new institutional arrangements and policy contexts associated with globalization and global governance have emerged. We live not only in the 'information age', when the question of knowledge and how it is generated, tapped, managed and used has become paramount, but also in the age of 'good governance' and 'technocratic governance', when policy makers are expected to draw on evidence-based research and 'expert' analysis rather than simply be swayed by conventional power politics and institutional relations. We also live in the era of complexity, risk, and interdependency, which suggest the need for multistakeholder dialogues, partnerships and decision making, as well as networking and new forms of social learning, and forms of activism that place greater emphasis on collaboration and not simply confrontation (Bendell and Murphy, 2002; Utting, 2005a). In a context where the new knowledge culture and industry leads to information overload and 'confusion', 'consultation, coordination and collaboration have quickly become the

hand-maidens of knowledge' (Dufour, 2003). And in keeping with principles of new public management, those on the receiving end of international development assistance are expected to demonstrate 'efficiency', partly by being 'results based'. For researchers and their organizations this means having to show their worth by being policy relevant and to craft strategies and relationships to access and influence policy makers (Stone and Maxwell, 2004).

But this raises a complex set of questions. They include not only nuts and bolts issues, such as how research findings are packaged and disseminated, and who in the policy process should be targeted, but also whether research is both credible and relevant as far as policy makers are concerned. More complex still, as suggested above, are other issues related to the uptake of ideas (Carden, 2005; Court et al., 2005; de Vibe et al., 2002; Mosse, 2004a; Weiss, 1977). These include state and institutional capacity, as well as the politics of policy change and the way in which different interests, crisis conditions and perceptions of policy failure exert pressures on the policy-making process. They also include sociological factors, notably the fact that the researcher-policy maker nexus is mediated by a host of formal and informal social and institutional relations involving not only researchers, technocrats and policy makers but also activists, lobbyists, the media and various types of networks. Ideological and bureaucratic realities are particularly important; for example, entrenched ways of thinking and practice, the need to follow the 'party line' within government and development agencies, so-called path dependency and the way ideas 'percolate', as well as the topicality of a particular issue and whether or not policy makers recognize there is a problem that needs fixing. There may be internal resistance to change within bureaucracies, turfs and jobs to defend,

economic constraints, and incentive structures that condition the uptake of ideas and policy recommendations based on research.

To reflect on this complex reality, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) organized, in 2004, an international conference at the UN in Geneva which brought together scholars from various disciplines, activists and policy makers. The papers presented in this volume were originally drafted for this conference and subsequently revised on the basis of comments received from discussants and participants.¹³ As discussed below, they shed light on three sets of issues: first, the relative weight of ideas, institutions and power in explaining contemporary adaptations in international development discourse and policy, and how these elements interact; second, the potential and limits of the discursive and policy shifts occurring within the system of international development agencies; and third, the crucial elements of an alternative political and policy agenda that is needed to promote more inclusive and equitable patterns of development. By way of conclusion, this introductory chapter highlights the importance of such alternative approaches in a context where the dominant discourse and policies of international development organizations have converged considerably. In some respects, this convergence is more worrisome than encouraging, given the failure to rethink the dominant macroeconomic policy framework and to address issues of structure and power.

Ideas, Institutions and Power

Part of the analysis in this volume examines the determinants of contemporary changes in development language and policy, and reflects on the relationships between knowledge, institutions and power. Such an inquiry is, of course, not only important from an academic perspective, but also as a basis for understanding the potential and limits of discursive, policy and institutional change that claims to be promoting inclusive and equitable development.

In the Foreword, **José Antonio Ocampo**, United Nations Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs, sets the scene by reflecting on knowledge-policy linkages. Recognizing the crucial roles of ideology and interests in the interplay of ideas with economic and social policy, he points out that the influence of power relations and ideologies on ideas and policies is not necessarily direct or overt. Particularly important are the ‘blind spots’ in knowledge systems that affect ‘the questions that are asked and the filters through which reality is read’. Often what passes as knowledge is little more than opinions, which are susceptible to other influences and can spread like wild fire. The scope for ‘contagion’ is particularly rife in institutional settings where deviation from mainstream opinion and world views restricts ‘access to power and influence’. The history of progressive ideas related to development teaches us that they often emerge in settings where individuals and institutions are relatively independent of ‘the centre’ or mainstream schools of thought, free from the clutches of conditionality and dogmatism, and where intellectual pluralism, critical debate and non-mainstream perspectives can flourish.

Various contributors emphasize the fact that knowledge is not independent of ideology and politics. **Shalmali Guttal** (chapter 1) argues that so-called political will

is not an objective condition but is shaped by material and economic interests as well as a ‘universalization of specific forms of knowledge’. Development theory is not a disinterested body of knowledge but ‘speaks both from and to specific positions of class and power’. The upshot is a powerful knowledge industry that justifies the structures that generate inequality and poverty. The capacity to generate information and enshrine it as knowledge is dominated by a small set of academic, donor and international agencies, as well as private interests.

Employing discourse analysis, **Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock** (chapter 2) examine how powerful actors and institutions reinforce their positions and legitimacy through the language of development and the use of specific buzzwords, such as ‘participation’, ‘good governance’, ‘partnership’ and ‘poverty reduction’. Ideas and knowledge that are adopted by policy makers need to conform to particular frames of reference, which may vary considerably from one organization to another. The buzzwords they use form part of discourses, defined as ‘the ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena’ (Hajer, 1993). Today’s reformist language of development not only serves to legitimize particular approaches, but also diverts attention from questionable policies and practices that underpin maldevelopment. It is part of a hegemonic project in the Gramscian sense, where powerful actors and institutions attempt to ensure that their policies and practices have broad-based appeal. The authors also remind us that ‘struggles over meaning are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension’ when terms are put to use in policies.

The limitations of various strands of contemporary development discourse and policy can also be explained with reference to dimensions of academic inquiry and ideology that have deep historical roots. **Norman Girvan** (chapter 3) critiques the ‘universalistic pretensions’¹⁴ of neoclassical economics and the tendency for both ‘disciplinary compartmentalization’, whereby many economists detach the economic sphere from those of politics, culture and society, and ‘mathematical formalism’, which ‘allowed what may have been essentially ideological assumptions ... to be cloaked in a scientific garb’. Universalism was further reinforced by Eurocentrism and the colonial mindset that devalued non-European cultures and knowledge systems. Such a tradition partly explains features of contemporary development policy associated with standardized prescriptions and ‘additional doses of market-oriented medicine’ to correct for failed policies. It also helps explain the inability to acknowledge the importance of policy autonomy to design solutions that are context specific, and that recognise diversity, rather than universality, ‘as the principal feature of social reality that provides the intellectual challenge to the analyst and policy maker’.

A major constraint on the ability of international development organizations to act as knowledge agencies that provide intellectual leadership derives from institutional practices and culture. **John Toye and Richard Toye** (chapter 4) turn to the sociology of bureaucracy and a modified Weberian theory to show that while there may be some scope for original and critical research from ‘defiant bureaucrats’ or subordinates within international organizations, particularly in instances when those in authority lack instruments of power, individuals or units engaged in research are

subject to a variety of incentives and sanctions to toe the line and reaffirm propositions espoused by senior management or an organization's sponsors.

How knowledge is generated within, and used by, the bureaucracies of multilateral and bilateral development organizations, and its relationship to policy, is also addressed by **Kenneth King** (chapter 5). He traces the changes that have occurred in global education policy, arguing that the so-called 'knowledge revolution' within agencies like the World Bank and some of the bilaterals, such as the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), has been concerned not only with the centrality of knowledge in the aid process and development but also in using and disseminating existing knowledge more effectively within bureaucracies. He shows that the hegemony and influence of one particular strand of research within one particular organization – namely the World Bank – was a crucial determinant of the shift in education policy, from a broader commitment to universal education to the current Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of universal primary education with an emphasis on girls. In a context where development agencies, scholars and activists were searching for alternatives to the traditional approach centred on 'enclave projects', which was seen to have failed, this line of thinking found a receptive terrain, particularly when backed by the dissemination might of the Bank.

The roles of research and activism, and how they interact to influence policy, are examined by **Gita Sen** (chapter 6). Focusing on the field of gender and development, she shows not simply that combining research and activism is crucial, but also that building an effective nexus requires managing or overcoming a variety of tensions.

These include differences in understanding and perceptions of problems, their determinants and solutions; differences in power related to access to resources and connections; and sociological factors related to differences in the social and economic background of researchers and activists. For the research-activist nexus to be effective in policy change, another complex set of relationships must be managed with actual or potential allies and ‘the opposition’, recognizing that these are not homogenous categories but require different relations with their constituent actors and organizations. Once sufficient pressure and influence are brought to bear, powerful institutions are likely to respond; but they may do so first and foremost by changing their discourse, and reinterpreting or subverting the meaning of concepts and terms. The process of actually changing policy is likely to be characterized by ‘backlashes and foot-dragging’, which demands from the movements involved not only ongoing oppositional ‘street’ politics, but also negotiating power.

Bob Deacon (chapter 7) also places great store in the role of intellectuals and activists in the construction of a ‘counter-hegemonic’ project, and draws heavily on Gramscian analysis to understand the relative weight of ideas and power, and their relationship, in processes of policy reform. Referring to the field of social policy, he argues that ‘ideas do matter’, but that they need the backing of institutional power to induce policy change. He highlights the role of both ‘organic intellectuals’ in bridging disparate perspectives and struggles, and of knowledge networks or epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) in both framing issues and debates, and influencing policy agendas. The process of ‘framing’ (Bøås and McNeill, 2004) continues once ideas are taken up by powerful institutions: ‘they exercise their power by ‘framing’ ... which serves to limit the power of potentially radical ideas to achieve

change'. For this reason, radical ideas need to be associated with changes in the balance of social forces that derive from various forms of struggle (class, gender, ethnic). In relation to international development policy, transnational social classes (Sklair, 2001) and international struggles have a key role to play, particularly through a counter-hegemonic project where intellectuals and activists influence actors and organizations through a 'war of position' waged in numerous sites and on several scales (local, national, regional, international). Although much of this struggle will be concerned with immediate tasks and projects, it must also be part of a longer term vision and strategy involving the construction of global political alliances and a coherent set of policy principles.

In this latter regard, the UN has a crucial role to play. **Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss** (chapter 8) examine the genesis, trajectory and impact of ideas that have been associated with the UN system. They identify four ways in which such ideas have impacted international policy making: first, ideas – such as human rights and sustainable development – can shape international discourse or change conventional wisdom; second, ideas can shape a particular agenda for policy and action that modifies the dominant approach, as in the case of 'adjustment with a human face'¹⁵; third, ideas can influence the configuration of political and institutional forces and their bargaining power, as has occurred periodically when thinking related to the causes of underdevelopment and North-South inequality has reinforced groupings of developing countries demanding reform; and fourth, ideas can result in the formation or strengthening of institutions or programmes within agencies, for example, those concerned with gender equality or, more recently, the Millennium Project and the UN Global Compact. But why have some ideas, such as

human rights and sustainable development, taken off, while others, such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO) have quickly come and gone, or have been extremely slow to surface and gather momentum, as with the critique of neoliberalism. The authors note the broad range and complexity of determinants that include historical context, stifling managerial control, a culture of self-censorship and political correctness, enlightened or visionary leadership, institutional rivalries and coalitions, opposition from powerful states, the participation and influence of civil society organizations in research and consultation processes, and more open or closed networks of researchers and experts.

The Potential and Limits of Mainstream Reform

From the above it is evident that considerable caution should be exercised when assessing the pros and cons of recent changes in the language of development and associated policy reforms. While ‘poverty reduction’ and ‘good governance’, for example, certainly have a positive and action-oriented ring to them, all is not as it appears. Similarly, to assess the limits of the MDGs and PRSPs we need to go beyond explanations that focus narrowly on resource constraints, lack of political will or the inherent weakness of domestic institutions in developing countries.

The contributors examine the potential and limits of recent discursive and policy shifts associated, in particular, with poverty reduction, good governance and knowledge management. While transnational and local activism, and institutional and policy innovations, have opened up spaces for questioning the negative effects of the neoliberal regime, raising the global profile of poverty and inequality, and building new coalitions, there are some serious faults with current approaches to

poverty reduction, targeting and knowledge management, and their ability to promote more inclusive forms of globalization and development. The analysis of what is wrong with mainstream approaches centres largely on five elements: the ways policy and discursive reforms reinforce positions of power; the intellectual, institutional and political constraints that prevent international development organizations from being creative intellectual actors or ‘knowledge agencies’; the weakening of research and knowledge institutions supportive of independent and critical thinking; the persistence of the ‘one right way’ approach and conditionality that constrain development options in developing countries; and the limits of certain poverty reduction approaches, including targeting and PRSPs.

Shalmali Guttal notes the increasing capacity of the mainstream development establishment to respond to market and state failure, and to expand bodies of knowledge relevant for understanding social and environmental dimensions of development. She questions, however, whether the thriving knowledge industry associated with development issues does in fact do anything to change the policies and practices that generate or perpetuate underdevelopment. Particular strands of knowledge that have dominated thinking and policy in recent decades, and the seemingly progressive language of development, can, in fact, marginalize the interests of the disadvantaged, and depolitize development problems by turning them over to ‘experts’. As she and **Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock** observe, development problems tend to be taken out of context, and solutions are divorced from local realities and history. When international organizations do take up progressive ideas and terminology, this often has the effect of dumbing down alternative perspectives, as well as diverting attention from certain assumptions,

policies and structures that are at the root of inequality, vulnerability and marginalization.

The ‘one right way approach’ that is often said to characterize the policies of international financial institutions (IFIs) and some bilateral donors comes under fire from several contributors to this volume. **Norman Girvan**, in particular, questions whether contemporary shifts in mainstream discourse and policy are fundamentally changing this approach. Referring to the IFIs, he notes that ‘the standard response [to the failure of neoliberal policy reforms] is that additional doses of market-oriented medicine are required ... leading to a practice that some have called “adjustment without end”.’ As discussed below, alternative approaches are unlikely to be found within the institutional confines of these organizations, but in the new structural, institutional and political arrangements associated with regionalism and transnational activism.

Examining the case of the World Bank, **John Toye and Richard Toye** identify some positive responses to criticism and pressure, as well as to economic analysis that emphasized the role of human capital development in promoting economic growth. The upshot was that structural adjustment programmes had to pay far more attention to health, education, environmental protection and poverty reduction, and the policy process had to be more participatory. Nevertheless, the characteristics of large bureaucracies (noted earlier) served to reinforce existing positions and patterns of technocratic governance – to the extent that the authors question whether the PRSP process constitutes a ‘better way of securing national commitment to poverty reduction’.

In his assessment of trends associated with knowledge management in international organizations, **Kenneth King** suggests that it has often been more concerned with the more efficient use of existing knowledge than with generating new knowledge. He notes, however, some important differences in approach with some bilateral agencies, such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and DFID, attempting to modify traditional operational work and patterns of aid delivery away from an overemphasis on sectoral knowledge, to a more comprehensive and cross-cutting approach. Of particular concern is the fact that so-called knowledge agencies have done little to promote knowledge development in the South. When attention does turn to sharing knowledge with so-called partners in the South, there is a danger that the priorities regarding research and knowledge for development have already been decided. The recent revival of interest within the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and some other agencies in ‘capacity building’ in the South is potentially a positive development, but there is still little evidence that either this approach or that of knowledge management and ‘sharing’ will transform the traditional aid relationship.

Gita Sen examines the constructive role that research-based knowledge has played and can play in transforming international policy related to women and development, when organically linked to civil society activism. A strong research-activist nexus can give the women’s movement the analytical and political weight necessary for effective advocacy. She examines three areas where this has happened: the incorporation of gender concerns into macroeconomic policy; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and human rights and violence against women.

Analysing the politics of discourse, she recognizes the capacity of powerful institutions to co-opt the language of those seeking change, but argues that the adoption of new terms and approaches by such organizations should be seen in a positive light: 'if knowledge is power, then changing the terrain of discourse is the first step. ... It makes it possible to fight the opposition on the ground of one's own choosing'. She observes that activists and researchers have developed a more symbiotic relationship over time, but three sets of recurring tensions affect their relations: different perceptions and understandings of problems; power relations and control over resources; and control of and credit for knowledge. While the impact of the women's movement in changing mainstream discourse has sometimes been 'monumental', change on the ground at the country level has often been more circumspect. This is largely accounted for by 'the nature of the "opposition"; the positions of the allies; and the internal capacity and self-reflexivity of the protagonists'. At the international level, progress continues to be undermined by the policies of the Bretton Woods institutions (BWIs), which still appear unfavourable to women, as well as by various tensions that continue to divide research and activist communities, and the rise of religious conservatism.

A major concern with contemporary reforms in social policy relates to the retreat from the idea of universal entitlement to social provisioning and welfare, and the shift to targeting particular social groups or 'the poor'. **Bob Deacon** laments this development, pointing out that the declining financial backing and participation of the middle classes in state services is likely to result in 'poor services for the poor'. He notes, however, some positive advances that have occurred recently in both the discourse and practice of particular multilateral institutions. Shifts in global

discourse and particular programmes or activities of some UN agencies and the International Labour Organization (ILO) point to the reassertion of the politics of social solidarity and universalism in social policy. He also notes some signs of a shift in approach in the World Bank with regard to targeting. An important institutional development relates not only to the fact that there are an increasing number of institutions dealing with global social policy issues, but also to the shift in the locus and content of global policy debate and activity from the more established, sometimes more ossified, agencies and secretariats to potentially more dynamic commissions, task forces, networks and partnerships. Such arrangements 'present new possibilities for actually making global change in particular social policy arenas' and for constructing 'longer term global political alliances that might fashion sets of principles of the kind espoused by the [World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization]...' ¹⁶ Progress is being stalled, however, by US unilateralism, European Union social protectionism, and opposition to what is perceived by many as a 'Northern' project. Attempts to promote global redistribution and regulation have centred to a large extent on public-private partnerships and an alliance between multilateral agencies and corporate interests, which lack democratic accountability and regulatory clout. And while there is considerable agreement on the need for an international system of global social rights, promulgating and realizing such rights is impeded by weak political and administrative capacity.

What role have UN agencies played as an intellectual actor in contributing to development debates and policy, via the generation, dissemination and legitimization of ideas? In their assessment of this question **Lousi Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss** argue that 'the UN has had a more positive and pioneering record in

the economic and social arena than is generally recognized', but the record has been very mixed. They note numerous instances where UN agencies have played a pivotal role in changing the way the international community talks and thinks about development: the 1960s and 1970s, when the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) popularized dependency theory and the terms of trade debate; the 1980s, when UNICEF exposed the social costs of structural adjustment; the 1990s, when the idea of sustainable development was promoted. Often, however, innovative and progressive ideas get nowhere, as in the case of the New International Economic Order, or the inability of the Economic Commission for Europe to win the day with its approach to gradual post-Communist transition. The disconnect between knowledge creation and implementation is partly accounted for by the fact that 'implementation is not in the hands of the ideas-mongers, but of states'. Innovative and critical thinking confronts constraints, not least pressures for UN research to be 'politically correct'. The authors lament the weak reaction throughout much of the UN system to neoliberal thinking, particularly during the 1970s and much of the 1980s, and note that even the current focus on poverty reduction, PRSPs and the MDGs does little to seriously question the prevailing neoliberal economic orthodoxy.

Various contributors concur that there is greater scope for intellectual innovation within the UN than the Bretton Woods institutions. **José Antonio Ocampo** explains this by referring to the fact that the UN is 'a very plural forum [that] gives a stronger voice to the views and interests of weaker nations, weaker ministries within governments, civil society actors and schools of thought that do not share

mainstream views'. Thus the UN is well-placed to reassert its role at a time when neoliberalism shows signs of crisis, and when there has been a revival of interest in the role of domestic institutions in linking knowledge to policy in a virtuous circle. Strengthening local capacity, policy 'ownership' and knowledge systems requires a context that favours intellectual pluralism and a reinvigorated state sector. This cannot be achieved through the approaches that have tended to characterize the policies and operations of the Bretton Woods institutions, involving conditionality and the top-down imposition of ideas.

Alternative Approaches

While the changes we are currently seeing in discourse and policy do provide some spaces for progressive reform, the balance of opinion emerging from this volume is that they are unlikely to make a serious dent in the scale of global problems associated with inequality and poverty. At worst, they may divert attention from the real causes of maldevelopment and (re)legitimize conventional approaches and institutions. What needs to be done differently? Here the authors offer up a rich seam of analytical and strategic advice that can be summed up as follows.

First, deconstruct. **Shalmali Guttal** stresses the need to expose the interests and agendas behind 'the knowledge industry', and the way in which knowledge and theory are used to legitimize mainstream approaches and institutions, dilute alternative agendas and depoliticize development. The crucial challenge is to break 'the knowledge monopoly of the mainstream development establishment ... and in order to do this, we must develop a strategic awareness of the political economy of

knowledge creation, and actively support alternative ways in which knowledge is generated and shared'. **Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock** suggest that deconstruction serves to question taken-for-granted assumptions, and expose worldviews and contradictions: 'no longer shored up by myths, utopias become fragile; no longer underpinned by axiomatic assumptions, they become amenable to being remodelled, or indeed cast aside into dereliction'. Such a task, they suggest, is being facilitated by the current linguistic or hegemonic crisis, where people are becoming more sceptical of development-speak and where 'the different ideological underpinnings that constitute different ways of world-making come into closer view'.

Second, struggle discursively. Do not give up on progressive ideas and concepts whose meanings have been appropriated by mainstream institutions or elite interests. **Gita Sen** suggests that the uptake of new terms and frameworks is a sign not of failure, but of success: 'if knowledge is power, then changing the terrain of discourse is the first but very important step'. **Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock** suggest that strategies for change should attempt to reassert the meanings of progressive terms by relinking them in 'chains of equivalence' to other terms, such as 'solidarity', 'redistribution' and 'social justice', that have transformative connotations. When this is done, it becomes far more difficult to distort meanings.

Third, struggle to reconfigure the correlation of social forces. Various types of coalitions and alliances are emphasized by different authors. **Gita Sen** stresses the importance of strengthening links between researchers and activists, and building alliances with social movements or sectors of civil society that may share very

different views on some questions. All this ‘requires clarity, ingenuity, flexibility and, above all, stamina’. Relations with receptive bureaucrats and policy makers also need to be strengthened. This point is emphasized by most of the contributors who stress that international organizations, like states, are not monolithic entities. For **Bob Deacon**, the keywords are the Gramscian notion of ‘counter-hegemony’ and ‘war of position’, where alliances need to involve those within agencies that are supportive of the type of redistributive, regulatory and rights-based global social policy that is needed to promote inclusive globalization. He suggests that the emergence of new sites of decision making and action, and the nature of the intellectuals and experts they involve, may facilitate this task.

Fourth, forge real development partnerships. As **Bob Deacon** points out, however, such a counter-hegemonic project needs to be sensitive to the diversity of culture and practice at the local, national and regional levels. **Norman Girvan**’s analysis of these issues stresses the importance of exploiting the spaces for participatory policy making and learning that exist within agencies. The goal of such efforts should be to reorient development assistance away from top-down standardized policy prescriptions to ‘supporting and facilitating social learning for the attainment of mutually agreed development objectives through a process of continuous interaction, democratic participation and local empowerment’. **Kenneth King** observes that capacity development has a crucial role to play in the construction of a more inclusive and equitable global development agenda. In the field of education, however, far more attention has to be paid to the role of – and support for – the formal education system in developing countries, including higher education and national research capacity.

Fifth, new policy approaches. Following from their critique of contemporary poverty reduction strategies and aspects of social policy reform that emphasize targeting, several contributors identify elements of alternative policy approaches. **John Teye and Richard Teye** point out that poverty reduction, historically and today, is less related to adjustments in social expenditure budgets or ‘a shopping list’ of reforms, than to a coherent set of economic policies that promote broad-based growth and employment. They stress the need to understand the types of macro-micro linkages that make growth more or less effective in reducing poverty, and whether particular patterns of industrial or sectoral development are also key. Regarding the social arena, various contributors emphasize the need to reassert social solidarity and universal welfare provision, not only nationally but globally. This latter approach is developed, in particular, by **Bob Deacon** who emphasizes three aspects: global redistribution involving international social transfers financed through some sort of global levy; global regulation, particularly of trade, finance, investment and corporations; and global rights – not only promulgation, but realization through strengthening political and administrative capacity.

Sixth, intellectual pluralism and policy space. Various authors call for greater intellectual pluralism and policy space for developing country governments.

Norman Girvan insists that developing countries need greater autonomy in relation to the diagnosis of their own problems and the determination of appropriate policy prescriptions. This requires recognizing and validating the role of social knowledge that ‘inheres within society and not merely about the society’, and taking advantage of the spaces that already exist for participatory policy making and learning. Trends

associated with regionalism may offer considerable potential in terms of strengthening the capacity the South 'to shape globalization in its own interest'. Crucial in this regard are, first, the epistemic dimension, which 'relates to the accumulation of local diagnostic and prescriptive capacities for development policy making, linked to democratic participation in decision making at national and regional levels', and second, the instrumental dimension, which involves 'the benefits of intergovernmental functional cooperation and of market integration'. **José Antonio Ocampo** also stresses the need to promote intellectual pluralism, critical debate within international agencies, and stronger domestic knowledge systems as the only way to counter the imposition of misguided approaches. Rather than conditionality, what is needed is the strengthening of local capacity and national ownership of economic and social policies. This would foster virtuous links between knowledge and policy making by facilitating the analysis of economic and social reality, adapting foreign knowledge, cultivating autonomous knowledge, and designing policies adapted to particular circumstances. The role of international agencies should not be to promote dominant views, but to assist developing countries in building and strengthening their own institutions.

Seventh, strengthen the role of the UN. Several authors suggest that it is necessary to reassert the creative intellectual role of the UN and to correct the current situation where the driving force for economic policy rests with the IMF and the World Bank. For **Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss** this requires correcting the imbalance in funding which has seen resources associated with knowledge generation and management flow away from the UN to the Bretton Woods institutions. They point out that a reading of the history of progressive thought

within the UN system suggests that it is not consensus with the Bretton Woods institutions or with Washington that result in useful knowledge and policy change, but rather institutional environments where agencies exercise bold vision and leadership, prioritize the quest for social justice, promote multidisciplinary approaches, pay attention to country-level specifics, and remain relatively free of government and bureaucratic control. In this regard, they note the important role that ‘the quasi-university public research institutes’ within the UN system, such as UNRISD and the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER), can play in ‘reigniting the creative intellectual spark in UN economic and social work’, which has waned in recent decades in a context where criticism of neoliberalism has been fairly muted.

Finally, reflexivity. Social science research and civil society advocacy typically challenge the status quo or mainstream reform agendas and then propose alternatives. What often receive short shrift are the possible contradictions, tensions and unintended consequences associated with proposed courses of action. In a reflexive mode, several of the chapters in this volume offer refreshing insights into what might go wrong or backfire. **John Toye and Richard Toye** note that greater responsiveness on the part of the World Bank to civil society opinion has, on some issues, made that institution more responsive to US non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and US politicians taking up NGO concerns, rather than to its client countries. **Gita Sen** identifies various difficulties that often beset efforts to forge and sustain alliances between researchers and activists, while **Norman Girvan** spells out the tensions inherent in alternative approaches based on regionalism. **Bob Deacon** notes that the challenge of forging a global social policy needs to tackle head on the

tensions that currently divide northern and southern governments and activists on such issues. And several authors remind us of the dangers of placing too much faith in the role of progressive intellectuals or leaders within mainstream organizations, given the structural and institutional constraints in which they operate, or the absence of powerful coalitions to reinforce their views and policy proposals.

Convergence for Development?

Different perspectives on development, which in the past distinguished the Bretton Woods institutions from various UN and bilateral development agencies, had converged significantly by the end of the 1990s. In the 1960s and 1970s, UNCTAD, the ILO, the UN General Assembly and other UN agencies and entities promoted a more transformative, redistributive and regulatory agenda, emphasizing, for example, the leading role of the ‘developmental’ state, ‘basic needs’, agrarian reform, food security, ‘popular participation’, universal social policy, the New International Economic Order, business regulation, and import substitution industrialization. During these years there was a far clearer division of labour between the UN and Bretton Woods institutions, with the World Bank, for example, heavily engaged in supporting infrastructural development. With the ascendancy of neoliberal thinking and policy in the 1980s, and the decline of the socialist bloc and the non-aligned movement, the UN’s more ‘radical’ turn came to a fairly abrupt end. A context of financial crisis and budget cuts in early 1990s, and even proposals to do away with certain UN agencies, also contributed to an institutional culture where critical thinking was muted in some organizations that became hypersensitive to the actual or potential criticisms of certain governments. Nevertheless, various reformist

perspectives and causes such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘women in development’ and ‘adjustment with a human face’ continued to be actively pursued, particularly through the UN summits of the 1990s. Furthermore, certain flagship publications, notably UNDP’s *Human Development Report*, generally projected a message that was different to that espoused by the World Bank in its *World Development Report*.

By the turn of the new millennium, many UN organizations, bilateral agencies and the World Bank seemed to be playing a similar tune. This convergence manifested itself at conceptual, discursive, programmatic and strategic levels. Conceptually there is widespread adherence to ‘embedded liberalism’, which sees the simultaneous freeing-up of markets and the strengthening of institutions conducive to social protection and stability as the best bet for achieving socially inclusive patterns of globalization and development (Ruggie, 2003). In relation to global governance, there is common agreement that not only ‘civil society’, but also organized business interests and transnational corporations (TNCs), should play a more active role in development programmes and the policy process.¹⁷ There is also agreement that one of the keys to promoting development is ‘good governance’, which emphasizes the need for institutions, particularly governmental institutions in developing countries, to be transparent, efficient and accountable. At the discursive level, convergence manifests itself in the fact that agencies are using a similar vocabulary or discourse that has populist or even radical overtones, emphasizing the social, participatory and empowerment dimensions of development. At the programmatic, policy and strategic levels, it is reflected in the term the ‘post-Washington Consensus’¹⁸, which implies a more comprehensive range of policies to which most multilateral and bilateral agencies now officially subscribe. It is also

seen in the increasing adherence of mainstream development agencies to what can be called target-based development. This involves both the whittling-down of the international development agenda¹⁹ to a narrower set of targets, most notably MDGs, and the weakening of the principle of universalism in relation to the public provision of basic social services and the concomitant strengthening of approaches that attempt to ‘target’ vulnerable groups or ‘the poor’ (Mkandawire, 2004).

Implicit in this convergence is a ‘grand compromise’²⁰ that has two main features. First, the World Bank has adopted a more heterodox approach that continues to promote neoliberal basics centred on ‘flexibilization’ and the freeing-up of markets, foreign direct investment, privatization, export-led growth, and strict fiscal and monetary discipline, but pays more attention to the role of institutions, including the state, as well as to broader development objectives and approaches, such as poverty reduction, participation, gender equity and sustainable development, typically associated with UN agencies and development NGOs.²¹ Second, the UN continues to actively promote principles of human, sustainable and rights-based development without fundamentally questioning either the core pillars of the neoliberal project, or the contradictions between these different approaches and objectives. Not only are various UN institutions explicitly or implicitly supporting processes and policies of economic liberalization, stabilization and privatization; they have also transformed their relations with TNCs. Formerly kept at arm’s length or seen as objects of regulation, today they are actively engaged as ‘partners’ in development and poverty reduction efforts, and are expected to give back to society via corporate social responsibility and public-private partnerships part of what they have gained through liberalization and globalization (Utting, 2005b; Zammit, 2003).

Developing country governments and important sectors of civil society and academia in the global South are very much a part of this convergence and compromise. Such support is largely explained by processes related to conditionality and aid dependence, the rise of technocratic governance in developing countries, and the increasing influence in policy making of “experts” trained in a particular variety of economics in Northern universities. It is also explained by the absorption of southern intellectuals and NGOs into knowledge, consultancy and consultation networks dominated by bilateral and multilateral agencies, as well as the decline of domestic research capacity.²²

As the chapters in this volume make clear, such a compromise is extremely problematic from the perspective of forging an agenda that promotes inclusive and equitable development. It ignores not only the perverse effects of certain macroeconomic policies and associated conditionality, but also power relations that underpin maldevelopment, poverty and inequality. It can also foster institutional silence or self-censorship in international organizations on such issues. The compromise, therefore, needs to be challenged both intellectually and politically.

This challenge is gathering force, in a context where there has been an upsurge in activism centred on global justice (trade, tax, environmental and social) and campaigns to ‘Make Poverty History’, where certain developing countries are flexing their muscles in international negotiating fora, and where the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) appears to be declining²³. And from within the UN system there has been a spate of publications that are highly critical of neoliberal policies, structures of inequality, North-South relations, certain WTO rules, and the

dominant discourse and patterns of foreign direct investment, and which propose a very different policy and institutional regime.²⁴ Such positions, however, still tend to be associated with specific sites within the UN system or particular agencies; sites that enjoy at least some of the prerequisites for critical thinking noted by several of the authors in this volume, namely, autonomy from the intergovernmental process, bold leadership and “defiant bureaucrats”. It remains to be seen whether this new found radicalism will become a more generalized feature of UN thinking, given the institutional and governmental resistance to some of these perspectives and related publications that has emerged.²⁵

Certain adjustments to the compromise are, it seems, being made, reflected not only in the revival of critical opinion in some UN agencies, and in the fact that a number of Asian and Latin American countries are steering a more autonomous policy course, but also in the repositioning of the World Bank and the G8. Through its flagship report on *Equity and Development*, the World Bank acknowledged the important role of ‘some forms of redistribution’ in both social and economic development (World Bank, 2005). And the G8 leaders approved a series of measures concerned with debt relief and increased levels and quality of aid. They also voiced support for the concept of policy space, calling for ‘developing countries themselves and their governments ... to decide, plan and sequence their economic policies to fit their own development strategies, for which they should be accountable to all their people’ (G8 Gleneagles, 2005:27).

As several of the following chapters make clear, however, power structures and institutional culture at the World Bank make it extremely difficult to translate

progressive discursive shifts into meaningful policy change related to macroeconomic policy. And with the change in leadership, the question arises as to whether such shifts were a peculiar feature of the Wolfensohn era that may dissipate under Wolfowitz, as a result of changes in relations with different constituencies and priorities.

The limits to change were also apparent when the G8 failed to take concrete action on trade reform, while reforms related to other aspects of macroeconomic policy and to the international financial system and institutions remained off the Gleneagles agenda.²⁶ The subsequent meeting of the world's leaders at the 2005 World Summit at the United Nations also fell short of expectations. It did, however, reiterate the need 'to enhance the coherence and consistency of the international monetary, financial and trading systems' and also called for greater 'policy space' (see United Nations, 2005).

These concepts are potentially important for addressing the contradictions between inclusive development and ongoing neoliberal reform, and some of the 'blind spots' within mainstream thinking in international development organizations. If applied in practice, developing countries and a wider range of social interests may stand a better chance of reclaiming development agendas. They might be less constrained by conditionality and certain policy prescriptions, emanating from IFIs and some donor governments, that generate perverse developmental impacts, and they might have greater autonomy to determine policies and strategies better adapted to their own circumstances. However, like so many of the concepts or buzzwords analysed in this volume, the way they are interpreted and applied by elites and powerful institutions,

both nationally and internationally, can fudge or contradict their apparent intent. It is for this reason that critical thinking and intellectual pluralism within international organizations and knowledge networks, North and South, are so important, and why progressive ideas need the support of epistemic communities and institutions, as well as the backing of strong coalitions of social and political forces.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank Yusuf Bangura, Deborah Eade, Terence Gomez, Thandika Mkandawire, Shahra Razavi, Dennis Rodgers, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on earlier drafts, and Kate Ives, Jenifer Freedman and Anita Tombez for research and editorial assistance.

² Strictly speaking, Marx and Engels used these words in ‘The Communist Manifesto’ to refer to earlier historical epochs.

³ The 50 Years is Enough campaign was organized in various countries to protest the policies and governance structures of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the occasion of their 50th anniversary in 1994. The campaigns were institutionalized with the formation of the United States Network for Economic Justice and initiatives and organizations in several other countries.

⁴ The World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, brought together many world leaders and civil society activists to explore ways of mitigating the social effects of economic liberalization and structural adjustment, and of eradicating poverty and promoting full employment and social integration.

⁵ The *Human Development Report* (HDR) is commissioned annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It was first launched in 1990 ‘with the

single goal of putting people back at the center of the development process in terms of economic debate, policy and advocacy'. From 1995 to 2000, the HDR was fairly outspoken in its critique of dominant patterns of globalization (HDR, 1999), consumption (1998), economic growth (1996), and focused on such issues as human rights (2000), poverty eradication (1997) and gender equality (1995) (see <http://hdr.undp.org/aboutus/>).

⁶ The World Bank refers to itself as a 'knowledge bank'.

⁷ 'Voices of the Poor' is the umbrella title for three reports published by the World Bank in 2000 (see Narayan et al., 2000a, 2000b; Narayan and Petesch, 2000).

⁸ 'Social capital' generally refers to the developmental benefits that can derive from relations of trust, reciprocity, associational activity and organizational density.

⁹ See World Bank, 2005.

¹⁰ PRSPs aim to identify the macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes, as well as the financial needs of low-income countries, that will promote growth and poverty reduction. Prepared by governments, they involve multistakeholder consultations with selected domestic and external actors and organizations.

¹¹ In this framing process, other institutions also play a key role, notably the media (Carragee and Roefs, 2004).

¹² I am grateful to Dennis Rodgers for his views on this issue.

¹³ For a summary of the conference discussions see UNRISD Conference News, *Social Knowledge and International Policy Making: Exploring the Linkages* (Report of the UNRISD Conference, 20–21 April 2004), which was prepared by Deborah Eade and this author.

¹⁴ Such pretensions refer to the assumption that a particular world view or school of thought has universal applicability. This should not be confused with the notion of universal human rights.

¹⁵ The phrase refers to the critique of structural adjustment programmes emanating from research sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the mid-1980s. See Cornia et al., 1987.

¹⁶ Regarding the principles and policy recommendations of the Commission, see ILO, 2004.

¹⁷ Such a position contrasts with the more antagonistic relations between certain parts of the UN system and TNCs in the 1970s, when attention focused on a New International Economic Order and a code of conduct for TNCs.

¹⁸ 'Post-Washington Consensus' refers to an enlarged package of policy prescriptions that succeeded a set of structural adjustment and economic stabilization policies, which was known as the Washington Consensus because it was promoted most explicitly by the World Bank, the IMF and the United States Treasury, all located in Washington, DC.

¹⁹ This agenda had expanded considerably as a result of a series of UN summits held in the 1990s on issues such as sustainable development, women, social development, population and urban development, as well as growing attention to human rights and 'rights-based development'.

²⁰ The term has been used by French regulation theorists and others to refer to the compromise between capital and labour that was a feature of the so-called Fordist model of development (Lipietz, 1992).

²¹ This 'mission creep' is reflected in the topics addressed by the World Bank in its annual flagship report, which since the late 1990s has focused on knowledge (World

Bank, 1999), ‘attacking poverty’ (World Bank, 2000a), institutions for markets (World Bank, 2001a), sustainable development (World Bank, 2002a), services for the poor (World Bank, 2003a) and equity (World Bank, 2005).

²² Such concerns figured prominently in discussions at the UNRISD conference on ‘Social Knowledge and International Policy Making’. See, for example, the summaries of interventions by Rehman Sobhan, Adebayo Olukoshi and Marcia Rivera (UNRISD, 2004, pp.10–11).

²³ See, for example, Mark Weisbrot, ‘The IMF has lost its influence’, *International Herald Tribune*, 23 September 2005, p.7.

²⁴ See, in particular, *Economic Security for a Better World* (ILO Socio-Economic Security Programme, 2004), the *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2005), *Report on the World Social Situation* (United Nations, 2005), *Economic Development in Africa: Rethinking the Role of Foreign Direct Investment* (UNCTAD, 2005), and *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World* (UNRISD, 2005).

²⁵ Such resistance was particularly evident in the case of the ILO and UNCTAD publications noted in the previous footnote.

²⁶ See Oxfam International, 2005, and G8 Gleneagles, 2005.

