



Poor development. An epistemic rethinking to the field of social justice

Manuel A. Jiménez-Castillo (antonio.jimenez@ucp.edu.co) Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Administrativas, Universidad Católica de Pereira (Pereira, Colombia) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4450-9779>

Abstract

Development studies is concerned with two issues: the development of normative theories of development and justice (development discourse), and the empirical study of the effects of interventions and their impact on the global policy context (development policy). These distinct theoretical aims of the discipline lead to epistemological difficulties in practice. In this paper I argue that development studies suffer from two main conceptual deficiencies. The first one corresponds to an analytical incapability for providing a definitive version of social justice that is simultaneously impartial and plural. The second weakness involves an empirical deficiency related to development discourse and current policies and practices. Identifying both epistemic deficiencies inherently embedded into what development has traditionally been about, may help to shed light on its analytical and technical boundaries and thus its ability to truly carry out its stated goals. To that end, this paper focuses on highlighting the consequences of these two epistemic oversights. I conclude that the field of development has no other alternative than (re)turning to its epistemic roots to adequately review the very essence of its conceptualization and effects.

Key words: development studies, ethics, impartiality, plurality, operability.

Guidelines of a self-absorbed discipline

Development Studies is shaped by two attached issues; the first one is related to what academics refer to as “development theory”, defined as the normative discourse ascribed to a specific theory of social justice (Deneulin *Ethics and development*, Sen *A theory of justice*, Rawls *A theory of justice*). The other issue involves the study of “development cooperation” being also referred as the global architecture from which a policy agenda is well implemented (Dang [Amartya Sen’s capability approach](#), Fukuda-Parr [Should global goal setting continue, and how, in the post-2015 era?](#)). These two dimensions of Development Studies rely on two major challenges; the first one aim at establishing a coherent development theory as plural as impartial and so able to facilitate the design of a universal list of development goals consistent with people’s diversity. Secondly, insofar as the notion of development largely deals with poverty eradication and welfare enhancement it also requires a set of technical strategies to allow the implementation of development agenda (Rapley [Development studies and the post-development critique](#)). The historical struggle between development discourse and development policy has hindered the access for a coherent development theory (Schuurman [Critical development theory](#), Sumner & Tribe [Development studies and cross-disciplinarity](#), Colbrige [The \(im\)possibility of development studies](#)). This obstacle constrains the promise of achieving a set of worldwide development assumptions that could



reorganize the infertile and dispersed scholarly research output (Schuuman [Critical development theory](#)). This academic discord has essentially revolved around three intellectual reactions.

Ideological inertia. Development's academic view is strongly consolidated by contemporary discourses, rather than being the result of critical social inquiry. So for example, when authors such as Kilby ([The changing development landscape](#)) and Escobar (*Encountering development*) notice that Development Studies are aimed at the impact of neo-colonialism and the forces censured by hegemonic discourse, what they do is no longer embodying a simplified view of development as conceptually poor as the classical one. Indeed, there is no evidence in post-development discourse about the real causes of poverty and wealth that might be fairly transferred into a research agenda; "Post development's strength is a hermeneutics of suspicion, an antiauthoritarian sensibility, and hence a suspicion of 'alternative managerialism'. However, since it fails to translate this sensibility into a constructive position what remains is whistling in the dark" (Pieterse 2000:182).

Theoretical and instrumentalist technique-oriented valuation. Scholars' efforts have been traditionally focused on both aprioristic based analyses, as occurs in contemporary development theories and experimental development studies such as "randomized controlled trials". In such researches "what work" is vaguely assumed in terms of either empirical understanding (Banerjee & Duflo *Poor economics*), or rather, universal beliefs (Sachs *The end of poverty*). Instead of assuming a "dialectical approach" that would re-define restrictions embedded on each methodological spectrum, these ideologically opposed orientations, instead, confine development thinking into a needy plan of small or big questions.

Institutionalization of development studies. A major concern of international development architecture has placed the attention paid to cross-national political spaces undermining the ability to implement development strategies between agencies, local and regional governments and social movements: "consisting of deliberate efforts aimed at improvement on the part of various agencies, including governments, all sorts of organizations and social movements" (Bernstein 2006:48). For instance, best-sellers such as *Why Nations Fail* over-emphasize the role of governance and political institutions as the cause of long-run development: "in particular, they influence investments in physical and human capital and technology, and the organization of production. Although cultural and geographical factors may also matter for economic performance, differences in economic institutions are the major source of cross-country differences in economic growth and prosperity" (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012:75).

Policy-makers' goals might not assume a multidisciplinary development understanding of what really works and what might not, focusing, instead, on a trial-error standing with notable deficiencies on development agenda (Easterly [The big aid debate is over](#)).

A challenge presents itself when it comes to the ability of academics to build a unified development theory where ideological-based discourse and technical instruments would be conveyed by a mutual understanding of what development means and how it can be traced (Banerjee & Duflo *Poor economics*). The very focus of this work is about expanding Development Studies as personal wellbeing. Its object rests restricted due to an *ontological gap*. Such impossibility deals with the very core of development; that is to say, assuming a very operative development view. The conflict between development theory and development practice can be understood as a progressive



dialectical force. Throughout an adequate identification of its knowledgeable status, development notion would clearly progress.

As I noted above, such arguments condemn the bases of Development by using a restricted combination of partially rational paradigms. This work argues, instead, about the analytical impediments to conceive a completed development's understanding. In this respect, the argument that I am attempting to make here does not concern what ideological or technical approaches offer. Rather, my point reorganizes development overviews to expose those factors that bear it as a "dark science". The paper can be summarized as follows; my starting point is one of highlighting what I call development's ontological gap by shedding light on the confusion associated with the dispute between opposed schools of thought. Given this epistemic tension, I will introduce what I call development's natural disaster where I distinguish two gaps embedded on the very nature of development -normative theory and practice- and the extent through which both dialectically evolve. In the final section I will expose a synthetic reflection upon those key assumptions analysed along the text.

The awkward nature of Development Studies

Over the past second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twentieth-first century, the theory of development research has undergone recurrent changes; from those who firmly assert that human development is about enlarging people's empowerment to the fulfilment of basic needs. This turnaround has thrown the discipline into an epistemic crisis: "everything that development used to represent appears to be in question, in crisis" (Pieterse 1996:549). It can be drawn from Pieterse that development theory has been unreflectively fluctuating from macro-discourses to actor-orientation, agencies, and institutions; from bipolarity to polycentrism addressed by a large set of "suspicious" ideological accounts. Because of such a dispute, the core of the matter meets with the necessity to harmonize a common basic argument about the first object of development. This fact is well illustrated in Debray Ray's work where he asserts that Development Studies is "a subject that studies institutions, growth, inequality and poverty in the developing world, is a large, lively and exciting area of research" (Ray 2007:4); where many epistemic understandings feel freely authorized to interfere but few are so operative to conceptualise its basis (Sumner & Tribe [Development studies and cross-disciplinarity](#)).

Due to development's unfixed nature, Development Studies has recently fallen into a deep discredit, turning out into an ambiguous methodology -easier to describe rather than define. Such circumstances have also triggered a profound undermining of the development research agenda due to the absence of generalizable technical interventions: "while development practices driven by a belief in manageability, possibility of positive change and existing hope, some sections of development research are driven by the need of critical thinking and varying degrees of cynicism toward the very possibility of change or hope" (Jauhola & Kontinen 2014:349).

Such confusion would presumably respond to a noticeable misunderstanding between *development process* and *development research* that blurs the very aim of development. To face such misperception, the development discipline must be acknowledged as an autonomous body where what works or does not ought to be subjected to what development essentially means and does not mean. From this standpoint, post-development scenario shall be interpreted as a chance to transform the very essence of Development Studies rather than turning out into a relativist



ecosystem about countless development experiences (Escobar *Sentipensar con la tierra*), to get rid of the diffusive perspective that monopolise cross-disciplinary thought. In any case, the required epistemological turn does not appeal to any kind of scientific spoofing. What really matters is quite remarkably stated by Pieterse: “to add a level of reflexivity, theoretical refinement and sophistication to Development Studies, and thus to open the politics of development to a more profound engagement” (Pieterse 2010:14). According to Pieterse’s statement it is only by a theoretical upgrading that Development Studies might be tackled to bridge the gap between *theory*-orientated and *technique*-orientated research (Sumner & Tribe [International development studies](#)). In other words, the purpose of the matter must be orientated to open new spaces of enquiry where Third World’s diversity is accounted and fixed to a list of universal justice prescriptions.

The preceding issues have historically aimed Development Studies so as to be conducted by dark roads rather than proceeding as a tenable scientific-deliverer of current development problems: “Development Studies has always been, and probably will always be, an uneasy discipline, and by default, so is development research” (Schuurman 2009:831). What conceptually arises as a result is merely a permanent intellectual conflict between those key development research tendencies (grand-theories versus context-specific approaches).

The field of Development Studies is ontologically uncompleted. That status might hide Sumner and Tribe’s unknowingly the argument about development as a cross-disciplinary area. This fact, according to which development is nothing but an independent discipline, appears simply as “wet-paper” in so far as the authors never explain (always appealing to a sense of unreachable complexity) the real extent to which development should interact with other disciplines. The point that makes it a multidisciplinary area has nothing to do with *defining as the result of* but is seen as the core of a branched area where development theories are assumed in terms of an ethical refinement. With this statement I am tempted to outline two noticeable deficiencies. On one hand, the sense of development seems to be epistemologically unbearable to address those cross-multidisciplinary factors that frame it (Sumner & Tribe [Development studies and cross-disciplinarity](#)). Such an issue links to the second argument that concerns the main barrier to reconcile development discourse with development cooperation. Along the rest I assume the task of explaining how both “natural disaster” specifically work *-discourse and practice-* and why a dialectical methodology is undeniably required to provide a restored understanding on such dilemmas.

The first natural disaster: a theoretical emptiness

Beyond practice-oriented and theory-oriented approaches two immanent points are identified. On one hand, Development Studies launches a normative conflict between the ethical principles of plurality and impartiality given at each stage of the development theories. As a result, each formulation represents, on the other hand, a better explanation of what social justice would entail reflected on the very aim of bridging the gap between both ethical principles. In the following lines I will pay attention to both entities, illustrating how the main economic and human development theories have historically encountered it.

Let us start the analysis with the so-called Contemporary Development Theories with which Development Studies emerges as discipline. Beyond such explanations on economic and social mechanism, all of them share an identical form of value embodied in terms of *utility*. Such a moral



articulation “embodied as general welfare and rational social choice theories” (Sen 1987:65) rests on a reliance relationship grounded between plurality and impartiality. Far from coherently gathering both normative entities (that would represent a definitive stage of development theory), impartiality means a misleading view of human plurality (Jiménez-Castillo [Amartya Sen frente al espejo social de la libertad](#)). Human plurality relies with a vary arrange of social misrepresentations of what I am definitely for myself, that is to say, the self-personal interest is grounded in the notion of well-being (defined as maximization of personal utility) that results from the commodity provided. Such a condition inevitably produces a widening of development’s gap as it the concept of well-being is indifferent to welfare distribution and global justice concerns (Sen *Development as freedom*). Neither of Myral and Nurke’s hypothesis nor core-periphery arguments is adequate to overwhelm the high-restricted utility-based approach that “increasingly operates according to market logic” (Schuurman 2009:876).

The shift from economic to human development occurs when impartiality takes as the core of social justice. Until then, justice as fairness is entirely doomed to inter-temporal comparison events with aggregate ethical principles. It is within Rawlsian interpretation where impartiality unfolds without detriment, defeating those normative constraints affected by utilitarianism. Such moral barriers have encouraged a mechanism of self-stimulation to re-judge a new ethical relationship where impartiality rests comparatively further fortified. In Rawls, the idea of justice is seen “as fairness” whilst impartiality largely embedded by a *just society* and arranged by reasonable agents succeeded in reaching social agreement. To that end Rawls traces a social contract where justice is seen in the light of goodness and goodness as fairness: “the guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles (...) specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established. This way of regarding the principles of justice I shall call justice as fairness” (Rawls 2002:76).

On this normative upgrade, Rawls’ thesis succeeds in reshaping prior-utilitarian doctrine resting plurality as a mere extension of impartiality. Rawlsian social justice principles arise from an *original position* that promotes a high level of human’s neutrality subjected to a veil of ignorance “without knowledge about their individual identities in the society” (Rawls 2002:124). This fact implies a wider understanding of justice since welfare distribution is now coherently apprehended. Considering that Rawlsian justice stands out as a double ethical dimension; in terms of what I name *inter-normative* scale, Rawls provides an ample understanding of impartiality as fairness; meanwhile from an *intra-normative* perspective he does recognize people’s ordinary life by assuming a plural principle of “access to” grounded on a list of primary goods. Nonetheless, Rawl’s efforts to assure human plurality are not sufficient to bridge development’s gap. His primary goods main principle is confined to what human necessities entail and that deals with the extent to which people’s diversity is materialized.

Equity’s bounds as social justice misrepresents development ends, focusing on the premise that fairness concerns on a list of basic goods when last evidence strongly aims to capabilities as human rights: “The impartiality that is needed cannot be confined within the borders of a nation. We have to go much beyond Rawls for that reason, just as we also have to go beyond the enlightenment provided by his use of ‘primary goods’, and invoke, in that context, the more articulate framework



of capabilities” (Sen 2002:123). As it also occurs with contemporary development theories, such apparent logical disorder condemns justice to a fetishized social relationship that confuse basic goods with what people can effectively do with them. This fact leads Rawls to wrongly expect that an adequate endowment of universal primary goods would be finally restored.

During the 90’s raised an extensive literature concerned about the real quality of human life and how the fulfilment of Universal Basic needs compromise what Rawls persistently ignored. A basic human needs approach come to overwhelm Rawlsian plurality’s deficiency. This approach shows an ethical upgrade since personal satisfaction is much more reasonably fulfilled throughout what each person specifically demands than in the mere provision of equal goods for all.

To what extent is “basic needs” approach more appropriated to present an ethical enhanced theory of justice? What kind of ethical boundaries are supposed to mean such human development interpretation behind it? The first thing to say about its normative enhancement traces an ethical description of *human necessity* as a critical reformulation on Rawls’ plurality. The real concern renders on people’s and good’s interactions no longer sustained on the fetishism of commodity but on the self-requirement. This dialectical turnaround might be in a better condition to acknowledge people’s diversity other than a list of basic goods. This aspect leads to the “basic needs” dispute; in what sense, is it likely to trace an adequate basic needs theory as plural as impartial when universal human necessities cannot be unified at all? In this respect, what we will find out is a vague attempt to release development literature from reductionism.

Despite some advance in Haq (*The poverty curtain*) and Streeten (*First things first*), none of them go far enough to overcome fetishism of commodities in need. It is Amartya Sen who outlines basic needs’ deficiencies to ascribe what has to be as universal as plural since so much in people’s necessities are conditioned by human and geographical diversity: “the requirement of food and of nutrients for the capability of being well-nourished may greatly vary from person to person depending on metabolic rates, body size, gender, pregnancy, age, climatic conditions, and parasitic ailments” (Sen 1999:47). Restrictions on basic needs might not arguably use up impartiality’s effects. Even though such a notion appeals to what people really need to fulfil primary requirement it is lastly resolved by undermining people’s diversity. Theory of development defines basic needs in terms of *minimalistic ethics*-based style (Sen *Rationality and freedom*). Such a definition displaces others relevant items (functionings and capabilities) that take part in an ample welfare notion. Sen’s capability approach reflects evaluative roots attached with “active diversity” where the principle of functionings emphasizes the real life that people achieve to enjoy. Despite Max-Neef’s efforts to extend technical effects to people’s empowerment, his method largely fails so far as basic needs fulfilled it only serves to facilitate a determined achievement but never to make it effective. The faculty to achieve welfare goals requires an effective inclination of human will and that essentially cope with the grade of personal and social freedom that people enjoy.

Sen’s theory represents the recognition of people’s freedom attainable among a set of human functionings combination as enlarging people’s choices. In contrast with utilitarianism, Rawlsian and basic needs approaches, Senian impartiality is not claimed as commodity achieved, but rather it unfolds towards distinctive manners of assessing personal’s welfare. As development becomes more broadly based, plurality effects go further. For instance, the concept of well-being is no longer confined to favour high rates of education or life expectancy but focused on people’s capabilities to form goals, commitments, and values rather than resting on personal pleasure: “*Capability*



approach sees human life as a set of *doings and beings* (we may call them *functionings*) and it relates the evaluation of the quality of life to the assessment of the capability to function” (Sen 1999:42).

To that end Sen’s idea of justice does not entail with good supply but it adopts a turnaround on what people certainly can do with them, as expanding real opportunities to achieve a good life, whatever her conception of the good life is. Assuming wellbeing as a piece of individual capabilities lies with -as no other social justice theory does- the furthest-reaching decrease in development’s gap. Capability framework is properly able to identify “agency targets” rather than treating personal utility as the core of a valuable good life. Consequently, agency goals not merely entail an expansion of self-interest purposes, as it comes about with utility theory, but it also addresses some other relevant personal criteria that ultimately affect people’s living standard. Such a concept undertakes a reconceptualization of plurality principle throughout the concept of “social agent” that is better off than ever to judge her achievements in terms of freedom enjoyed (Sen. *A theory of justice*).

Sen maps out the notion of freedom as the main end and the primary means of development. Indeed, he releases freedom from an abstract self-ruled organism to focuses on a realistic notion of real opportunities. This ethical standing is much more adequate to manage development’s gap. Following the very insight of plurality, Amartya Sen supplies a set of social justice’s global indicators that correspond with how people freely enjoy their own decisions-making. To do that, Sen distinguishes between the twofold scope on human wellbeing achievements, that is, welfare and agency targets. Whilst the first deals with the quality of life in terms of beings and doings the second outlines rational plan to pursue such a life: “the effect of ‘other-regarding’ concerns on one’s well-being has to operate through some feature of the person’s own being. Doing good may make a person contented or fulfilled, and these are functionings achievements of importance. In this approach, functionings are seen as central to the nature of well-being, even though the sources of well-being could easily be external to the person” (Sen 2002:148). Beyond that, he is even aware of how such goals are attained. In reference to the capability approach, well-being is not exclusively ranked to achievement itself but integrating the grades of freedom of goals achieved. Such a distinction permits Sen to contrast between welfare maximization and plurality of people’s decision taken.

Nevertheless, the Senian approach is not exempted from significant boundaries. Even though Sen’s model represents the greatest analytical progress, his idea of freedom never develops all the aspects to achieve the real freedom he defends. This fact relies with a wide array of implications much of them focused on how real freedom (free to plus free from) might be released from Sen’s freedom idea of simply choices achieved (*free to*). In this view, a person’s liberty may be compromised even under no interference, simply by arbitrary power that interferes within person’s will act as they like, even though that intervening power is not actually exercised.

In recent work led by Deneulin ([Ethics and development](#)) and Alkire (*Valuing freedoms*) the notion of freedom undergoes similar changes. They state that “republican freedom” is more adequate than freedom as *opportunity* to identify those social aspects that constrain human empowerment. Indeed, people’s capabilities do not only depend on bearing “positive” abilities to successfully accomplish their life plans but rather favourable social conditions to make it happen. As Nussbaum states (in part following Sen’s earlier writings) the fact of equalizing positive freedom with real freedom inevitably confuse the notion of diversity with mere achievement: “Sen appears to believe



that the more substantial freedom one has, the happier one is likely to be. But the correspondence between positive liberty and happiness is not so close” (Nussbaum 2006:87).

The far-reaching emphasis on freedom “to choose” clearly diminishes the impact of diversity. Sen’s claims of diversity avoid the largest part of historical change that makes feasible the achievement of welfare and agency goals (Thomas *DFID and disability*). His definition of development lastly seen as a matter of real freedom in the form of *opportunity* propels an unreconcilable asymmetry between plurality as expansion of people’s diversity and impartiality (Sen *A theory of justice*). So, a relevant question arises: how could we draw interpersonal functionings comparison when Amartya Sen never provides a framework of value-heterogeneity? In other words, how could be the notion of impartiality weighted when technical problems would entirely derive from people’s diversity? Authors such as Nussbaum have facilitated uncontroversial assignments based on a minimum list of common capabilities even when divergences on personal values affect human functionings: “The basic idea of my version of the capabilities approach is that we begin with a conception of the dignity of the human being, and of a life that is worthy of that dignity (...). With this basic idea as a starting point, I then attempt to justify a list of ten capabilities as central requirements of a life with dignity” (Nussbaum 2003:36).

The second natural disaster. The fetishism of international cooperation

Development Studies is not an ethical exercise but rather a realistic program to increase people’s standard of life (Molteberg, Bergstrøm, Haug [Interdisciplinarity in development studies](#)). The second development’s natural disaster comes into being as bridging the gap between development research and development operability. Its academic relevance traces the most refined development theory, that is, Sen’s capability, which bears relevant normative implications as a practical guide to context-dependent interventions. This fact would explain the following statement: “despite the fact of Sen’s work *Commodities and Capabilities* in 1985, the number of empirical applications is still quite limited” (Robeyns 2000:26).

Chiappero goes even further with this reasoning when he asserts that: “Undoubtedly, the richness of such theoretical argumentation is not easy to translate into practical terms. The capability approach is certainly more demanding at an informational and methodological level if compared with more standard approaches (i.e. income or opulence-centered analysis) to well-being; it is also hard to constrain and to manage in the traditional framework of welfare and poverty analysis, if we want to fully preserve its informative and interpretative contents. These difficulties could partially explain why, up to now; there are relatively few empirical applications that have been able to capture the richness of such a perspective even if many well-being analyses conceptually refer to it” (Chiappero 2000:3).

Two relevant questions arise about development’s operability. The first one appeals to the incompleteness of Sen’s approach shaping by the following inquiry; why do those development theory advances are not well-reflected on development cooperation? There exist three main reasons that would explain the persistence of “commodity fetishism” along development interventions. The first one relates to those empirical effects bond to Sen’s freedom. Rather than being defined in terms of commodities, the *counterfactual nature* of freedom means that “could have a good deal of freedom, without achieving much” (Sen 1987:1). In this regard, it is unlikely to fully measure how a technical intervention can impact on recipients’ capabilities as what make



capabilities work is always much closer to a quest of “being” instead of “having”. A second obstacle lies with the potential ability of capability’s approach to properly weigh people’s wellbeing. Sen’s faculty to recognize people’s heterogeneity is lastly restrained by the adoption of subjective judgments. After all, people’s capabilities are nothing related to ensure adequate aid-provision but a relationship of being (in this case, expanding real opportunities) with supplied aid. Sen has no other way than assuming an aggregate function that, in contrast, will undermine the diversity that rests on functionings: “the passion for aggregation makes good sense in many contexts, but it can be futile or pointless in others” (Sen 1987:33). This reason reinforces the extended struggle to escape from commodity’s fetishism, invalidating the hypothesis of poverty-reducing impact on aid-interventions.

Another relevant point deals with how development aid debate and capability approach have been historically driven. The first point relies with economists who have traditionally interpreted development intervention in terms of a “big picture” plan. This fact covers a set of meta-narrative thesis focused on balancing development aid with human progress. Recent changes in development agendas have fostered academic consensus around two main deals. The first involves those who support enthusiastically Jeffrey Sachs’s “Big Push” thesis according to which ambitious development aid programs would effectively manage global challenges associated with poverty and social inequality (Sachs *The end of poverty*). In contrast, supporters of Easterly’s thesis defend an anti-development aid plan far away from maximalist development goals and majorly focused on specific interventions that empirically work and keeping those interventions going.

Neither a “Big Push” development plan nor a “piecemeal approach” has been enough to shed light on how development aid must be correctly managed. This might be linked to the following reasons. In reference to Sachs’s deficiencies William Easterly focuses on seeing development as a simplified logistic trouble from bad government policies. Other than such critics, Easterly’s institutional understanding underestimates as well much of the relevant empirical evidence that markedly leaves out the possibility to trace causality between development aid policies and growth effects (Easterly, Levine and Roodman [New data, new doubts](#)). In this respect, Sachs’ ideas blur the possibility of supplying effective technical instruments for development aid both to break the gap between the “haves” and the “haves-nots” and the identification of those factors that strengthen its impact (Collier *The bottom billion*). The promise of a “big solution” aid plan is no longer an answer for overwhelming the unrealistic development goals that: “since Sachs is a gifted political campaigner as well as an economist (...) He reiterates the promises of great results so frequently that it seems to be more than political rhetoric” (Easterly 2006:98).

Empirical evidence does not do better when the anti-development approach confronts “authoritarian consensus”. Even when Easterly refuses Sachs’ technocratic illusion as presuming that national development is the result of national actions; he never provides alternatives to face the quest of development. For instance, when Easterly censures the perverse mechanism of public incentives behind development aid system, no reasons confirm that he would have upgraded Sachs’ approach. His “empirical” interpretation of development aid is also based on a minimalist procedure even when he overstates that “small pushes” strategy would restore pro-economic growth plans (Easterly *The big aid debate is over*). Certainly, he proceeds by selecting such empirical data that reproduce his own sceptical belief, but nothing related to a distinct scenario where development aid debate might enrich.



From the two minimalist positions arise an alternative methodology able to deal with experimental research's deficiencies. An ever-increasing number of scholars has accounted that only by the study of specific micro-scenarios we could extract relevant information about development's operability (Awaworyi *The impact of microfinance interventions*). By randomized controls trial, economists such as Duflo and Banerjee extract empirical knowledge to weigh the impact of development aid programs on households and local communities. This original "context-specific" methodology has traditionally been used on microfinance studies where a beneficiary "treatment group" is provided by microfinance services. Such a comparative methodology between recipients' group and control group would offer relevant information about development policies impact on people's real freedoms. Nevertheless, this approach is also affected by some conceptual boundaries. One of them, as Easterly has recurrently stated deals with the fact of shrinking development's effects to empirical data. The attention on "small questions" based approach diminishes its influence if experimental research is restricted at space and time.

The empiricism of such framework denotes a huge analytical deficiency as it without providing a "general theory" to guide evidence; it is unfeasible to universalize empirical knowledge. Far from increasing it, experimental economy is enclosed in a self-referential-based understanding. This is indebted to those contradictions found in Banerjee and Duflo's (*Poor economics*) as well as Karlan and Appel's (*More than good intentions*) that lastly confirm how tautology works at experimental research. The analytical care against development's over-simplification as "hard thought" is afterwards recklessly used to justify experimental exercises. The authors criticize over-promising in the aid business when they too often make use of exaggerated premises on their own methods. Both books end with overselling, "five key lessons" (Banerjee & Duflo) or "seven ideas that work" (Karlan & Appel), ignoring their own previous cautions about sensitivity to context and the limits to each intervention.

That is because a general theory can never be entirely detached from experimental knowledge since, in the last instance, there is nothing from experience itself that might provide stability and certainty to the maxims delivered by the sense of understanding: "without theory research studies are likely to be markedly descriptive with limited explanatory claims" (Sumner & Tribe 2014:83). To deny it, as experimental economists usually do, scholars tend to implicitly assume what is presumed to be a radicalization of such "hard-thinking" assumption.

Conclusion

What I attempted to provide in this paper is an explanation of those epistemological boundaries that Development Studies faces in its effort, to reach, a unified development theory that adds "different things at different times, in different places, and by different people in different professions and organizations" (Chambers 2004:186). To embrace this intellectual challenge, the paper focused on upgrading Sumner and Tride's ([Development studies and cross-disciplinarily](#)) cross-disciplinary thesis in order to render, instead, an alternative methodological apparatus. This deals with recognizing Development Studies as a contradictory and unfulfilled social science discipline. One of the facts that reflect this inconsistency relies with a fragile materialistic interpretation of social reality than seeing development as a never-ending dialectical process. To correct this, I have presented an alternative that emphasizes development contradiction as the unresolved tension between development theory and development practice.



The first of the two contradictions copes with the existence of a hole between impartiality and plurality in development theory. Far from being a scholarly discipline narrowly confined in terms of minimum standard of per capita income-earning, the underlying stimulus behind development renders as a dialectical exercise, ultimately enabled to bridge the moral disorder states presented in every single formulation. On the contrary, the second gap assumes the broad theme of development's operability. This challenge is extendedly highlighted in literature, primarily due to limitations of the two standings (theory and practice), both incapable of gathering the foremost factors that really make human development work. All in all, the fetishism of commodity resolves itself as the price that development pays for balancing social reality with human understanding.

In light of such dealings, I do not find out another alternative to enlighten what scholars have inferred as the "impossibility" of Development Studies, other than to concretise on its core; a ground that, in the last instance, has to do with knowledge's gap. The "emptiness" of the object of development rests as analytically sterile as empirically appropriate to re-design some back holes of a discipline, which is destined to both expanding the idea of wellbeing and as an instrument for, in Sen words, expanding the real freedom that people enjoy. The extractable lesson from this paper can be summarized as follows: according to the evidence shown, the field of development has no other alternative than (re)turning to its epistemic roots in order to adequately review the very essence of its conceptualization and effects. Only by doing so, would it be likely to overcome the strong degree of theoretical self-absorption associated with its inability to illustrate the first cause of economic progress. This has been the very commitment of this work.

References

- Acemoglu, D., Robinson, J. (2012). *Why nations fail. The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty*. Crown Publishing.
- Bernstein, H. (2006). Studying development/development studies. *African Studies*, 65(1), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180600771733>
- Chambers, R. (2004). *Ideas for development: reflecting forwards*. Institute for Development Studies.
- Chiappero, E. (2000). A multidimensional assessment of well-being based on Sen's functioning approach. *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali*, 108(2), 207-239. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41634742>
- Easterly, W. (2006). Planners vs searchers in foreign aid. *Asian Development Review*, 23(2), 1-15.
- Jauhola, M., Kontinen, T. (2014). Knowing development, development knowledge? *Forum for Development Studies*, 41(3), 347-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2014.962980>
- Nussbaum, M. (2003). Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2-3), 33-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570022000077926>
- Nussbaum, M. (2006). *Frontiers of justice: disability, nationality, species membership*. The Belknap Press.
- Pieterse, J. (1996). The development of development theory: towards critical globalism. *Review of International Political Economy*, 3(4), 541-561. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4177204>



- Pieterse, J. (2000). After post-development. *Third World Quarterly*, 21(2), 175-191.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3993415>
- Pieterse, J. (2010). *Development theory. Deconstructions/reconstructions*. SAGE.
- Rawls, J. (2002). *A theory of justice*. Belknap.
- Ray, D. (2007). Introduction to development theory. *Journal of Economic Theory*, 137(1), 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jet.2007.06.001>
- Robeyns, I. (2000). *An unworkable idea or promising alternative? Sen's capability approach re-examined*. Center for Economic Studies.
- Schuurman, F. (2009). Critical development theory: moving out of the twilight zone. *Third World Quarterly*, 30(5), 831-848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590902959024>
- Sen, A. (1987). *On ethics and economics*. Basil Blackwell.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (2002). *Rationality and freedom*. Harvard University Press.
- Sumner, A., Tribe, M. (2014). *International development studies*. SAGE.

Recibido el 2 Ene 2020

Aceptado el 27 Abr 2020