FROM **HOPE** TO **ACTION** THROUGH **KNOWLEDGE**

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Ramesh Bharuthram
and Larry Pokpas

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

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Re-imagining 'development': Brian O'Connell's legacy to the Institute for Social Development

Professor Julian May

Director, Institute for Social Development

Director, DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security

Introduction

Universities have had an ambivalent relationship with teaching and research programmes of development studies since the field was first introduced in 1937. Although firmly multi-disciplinary, the programmes have often been subsumed under single disciplines such as sociology, economics or political science, resulting in confusion as to the object of investigation and the specialist knowledges needed in order to undertake research (Schommer-Aikins, Duell, & Barke, 2003; Krishnan, 2009).

Furthermore, by its very nature, development studies are an applied field, requiring that its teaching staff are also active researchers and sometimes practitioners. Impact and credence are thus achieved not only through the conventional business of higher education, graduating students and publishing peer-reviewed papers, but through a plethora of other actions often not valued by universities. These might include the co-production of knowledge with policy-makers and communities; co-authorship of reports prepared by governments, international development agencies and civil society; workshops, training programmes and interventions aimed at building capacity; and contributing towards debate through publication in the popular press, social media or other mass media instruments.

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Finally, for many students, development studies are terminal degrees, often without feeder programmes from which undergraduate applicants can be recruited, and from which doctoral candidates emerge. Taken together, however productive a department or institute of development studies may be, university managers are often discomfited by the characteristics of such programmes and become “would-be systematisers and rationalisers”, merging development studies departments with those that offer professional qualifications (Copestake, 2015: p. 109).

The university from which I was recruited to join the University of the Western Cape (UWC) had consolidated one of the oldest development studies institutes in South Africa with fields of study as disparate as housing, architecture and community development. As a result, I started my journey with the Institute for Social Development (ISD) with some trepidation. I had been assured that the Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Brian O’Connell, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Prof Ramesh Bharuthram, regarded development studies as being of critical importance for an ‘engaged’ university, a term that I had not previously encountered. I was to find that this commitment extended to an active interest in the contribution of the academy to development more broadly and that Brian O’Connell would play an important role in helping me to re-imagine development studies, and to take the University’s Institute for Social Development into a new direction.

I will start by describing my own path to UWC and how I eventually became the director of the Institute for Social Development (ISD). This chapter will then consider the nature of development studies and the debates that have taken place since the field of study first emerged. I will then present an alternative view of the origins of the field, arguing that one of the first institutes concerned with the study of development was established in Southern Africa in 1952, well before similar institutions emerged in Europe. Finally, I will reflect on the unique contribution offered by Brian O’Connell during his presentations on the role of the university in society, how this shaped the next steps taken by ISD, and what this might mean for the future of development studies at universities in the Global South.

My journey to the Institute for Social Development

Three important events were particularly important in shaping my career in development studies and my journey to ISD at UWC. The first was the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa that was directed by Francis Wilson of the South African Labour

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and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town. Although I was not among the 450 participants who attended the conference held in April 1984, the Inquiry had been the motivation for the research that I undertook on rural poverty in the Umzimkhulu District of what was then the 'Republic of Transkei'. My own research had been held up by the cholera epidemic of 1980-1987 that resulted in 22 251 cases and 348 deaths (Kustner & Du Plessis, 1991). Based at the Reitvlei hospital in Umzimkhulu, then led by a committed public health practitioner, Dr Gerrit ter Haar, and under the mentorship of community leader, Nomathemba Mabuntana, I developed a deep concern to undertake research that makes a difference. I chose to focus my work on the causes, mitigation and ultimately the reduction of poverty. My first papers dealt with the measurement and characteristics of poverty in South Africa's Bantustans, with a focus on the underlying structural causes of differentiation, poverty and inequality.

To my knowledge, Brian O'Connell also did not attend the Carnegie conference. He was already trying to make a difference as the principal of Kleinville Senior Secondary School in the difficult circumstances of apartheid's 'dumping ground' in the Cape Flats. Elsewhere on the Cape Flats, the 'witdoeke' were engaged in a violent conflict in Crossroads and the United Democratic Front (UDF) was launched nationally and in the Western Cape in 1983.

There was much that needed to be done at that time. Poverty rates for the rural areas designated for African settlement were estimated at about 75%, compared to 43% for the total population of South Africa (May, 2012). Some 2.5 million people were estimated to be suffering from malnutrition, some of it manifesting in the most acute forms as kwashiorkor and marasmus, both of which I witnessed first-hand at Rietvlei hospital.

In my review of long-term poverty dynamics prepared for my Inaugural Lecture in 2010, I found that most studies that followed the Carnegie Inquiry concurred that, however measured, the prevalence of poverty increased sharply throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and continued to rise until 1993 (May, 2012). A report, *Key Indicators of Poverty in South Africa* prepared to assist the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and published by the Office of President Mandela in 1995, stated that South Africa had one of the worst records in terms of social indicators and inequalities in the world (MoP, 1995).

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The data used for this report were derived from the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD), a mixed methods research project that combined the first socio-economic household survey of all South African with a series of regional poverty profiles. Pieter le Roux represented UWC's ISD on the Steering Committee of PSLSD. I was among the researchers that contributed towards the design and implementation of the survey and met Pieter for the first time during the planning meetings of the PSLSD. I remember his concern that poverty be measured not only in 'moneymetric' terms, the share of people below a poverty line, but also in terms of social deprivation, disempowerment and discrimination.

This brings me to the second career-shaping event. In the period leading up to the first democratic elections in 1994, the findings of many research projects undertaken on poverty were distilled into the RDP, the policy framework proposed by the African National Congress (ANC) as the incoming government. I subsequently led two studies that arose from the work of the RDP Office, the Poverty and Inequality Report (PIR) and the South African Participatory Poverty Assessment (SA-PPA), both of which were prepared for then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki. Two outcomes followed from these reports. I decided to apply for an academic position at the re-launched School of Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and with Michael Carter, then a professor in applied economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, launched the first panel study of poverty dynamics in South Africa.

The KwaZulu-Natal Income Dynamics Study (KIDS) built on the survey component of the PSLSD. We planned to return to the same households in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in order to analyse the dynamics of poverty during this important period of change. To do this, we felt that we should first consult with SALDRU and with ISD, and so met with Francis Wilson and Pieter le Roux in early 1997. It was the first time that I had been back to UWC since attending the exciting conferences that the university hosted during the 1980s as the university established itself as the "intellectual home for the left". It was evident that the absorption of so many of its leading scholars into government, including the Vice-Chancellor, Jake Gerwel, had taken its toll. Student numbers had declined and many posts were vacant. Nonetheless, Pieter supported our proposal, further cementing my ties to UWC. I also began collaborating with researchers in the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), which had just been established at UWC. PLAAS eventually grew to become the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies in 2009.

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Over the next 15 years from 1997 until 2012 I continued to work on the determinants of structural poverty, joining colleagues from PLAAS at the Chronic Poverty Conferences hosted at the University of Manchester. It was apparent from these meetings that under the leadership of Brian O'Connell a new dynamism was emerging at UWC and that the University's international reputation was growing.

My own research interests also broadened to include the link between demographic dynamics and poverty. I collaborated with Rob Shell, then the head of population studies at UWC, in an initiative funded by the Mellon Foundation to broaden the base of teaching demography in South Africa. A particularly memorable week was spent with Rob at a conference on historical demography held at the University of Cambridge. Population and poverty in Victorian Great Britain, post-independence India and post-apartheid South Africa were to be compared. Rob and I were interested in the persistence of malnutrition among South Africa children. The conference opened on 8 September 2001 and abruptly closed soon after 9:59 am New York time on the 9 September. I spent the rest of that week waiting for a flight out of Heathrow. Coincidentally that week saw the emergence of a new collaboration with Ian Timæus of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine that eventually led to a research project at ISD and the publication of several papers on child malnutrition in South Africa.

This brings me to the third event that triggered my move to UWC and my first direct encounter with Brian O'Connell. In 2011 it became apparent that my time at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was at an end. I decided to give up my recently awarded South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chair in Applied Poverty Reduction Assessment and wrote to colleagues at PLAAS seeking a position. I was told that Pieter le Roux was about to retire and that the position of Director of ISD was about to be advertised. I applied, was offered the position and relocated to Cape Town in April 2012. I briefly met Brian during my interview, but my attention had been focused on persuading the panel of my suitability for the position. I have always associated presentations at UWC as being followed by incisive questioning and my interview was no different from my previous experiences. I was also pleased to meet Ramesh Bharuthram, with whom I had worked on the research policy of the newly merged University of KwaZulu-Natal. He was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic at UWC from 2008 during Brian O'Connell's tenure as Vice-Chancellor.

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I arrived at UWC in 2012 to find that due to attrition and retirements, ISD consisted of four staff members, all on short-term contracts, one administrator, and a tail of more than 100 master's and PhD students who had not yet graduated. As before, there was much to be done, including resolving my own ambivalence about the role of development studies at universities in South Africa.

What is the Development Problem and what role for Development Studies?

Key to understanding the contribution of Brian O'Connell to the renewed growth of development studies at UWC is the contested nature of the field of study itself. Development studies has been variously described as a relic of colonialism (Kothari, 2005); a product of decolonialisation (Loxley, 2004); an anti-politics machine (Ferguson, 1990); a desiring machine (De Vries, 2007); masculinist (Chua et al., 2000); anthropology's evil twin (Ferguson, 1997); irrelevant (Edwards, 1989); impossible (Escobar, 1988); or just plain dead (Apthorpe, 1999).

Notwithstanding these debates, when seeking accreditation for development studies as a subject under the Bologna Declaration on 1999, the European Association of Development Research and Training Institute (EADI) proposed the following as a definition:

Development Studies is a multi- and inter-disciplinary field of study (i.e. not a discipline) that seeks to understand social, economic, political, technological and cultural aspects of societal change, particularly in developing countries. It is characterised also by normative and policy concerns. It aims at contributing to possible solutions to societal problems that development or its absence may produce (EADI, 2005).

In South Africa, development studies were only given its own subject code in the revised Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) in 2014 following a submission by the South African Development Studies Association (SADSA). Here it is described as:

An area of study which focuses on the theories, principles, practice, praxis and policies of promoting integrated and holistic human development at local, national and international level in the context of poverty, inequality and exclusion amongst and between people. It includes theories and approaches to human and socio-economic development, underdevelopment, development management, development states, sustainable development and gender and development (DHET, 2014).

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My own training in development studies took place under the supervision of Jill Nattrass at the University of Natal. She focused on the three questions posed by Dudley Seers, the founding director of the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, now regarded as the premier centre of the discipline: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to inequality? What has been happening to unemployment? (Seers, 1979).

Later, following an opportunity to work with Robert Chambers, one of the key thinkers in 'participatory research', I added additional questions provoked by Amartya Sen: What has been happening to people's options and choices? What has been happening to people's control over their own lives?

I believe that these questions recognise that change is ongoing and will have positive and negative consequences. We call this change 'development', but this has long been recognised as normative. 'Development' comes in many versions: top-down, bottom-up, participatory, endogenous, planned, and now sustainable. Each of these involves choices and has multiple end-points, some of which are more desirable than others. The task of a development studies institute is to interrogate these contestations and to raise inconvenient facts about development

This leaves those who work in development studies institutions with a number of conundrums: Is the premise underlying development studies that those in 'less developed countries' are somehow different from those in developed? Is the role of the development studies student to develop 'borderlands' characterised by poverty, war and social regression? Has the role of development studies been to make 'us' more like 'them'? Does the development studies student assume responsibility for the improvement of the objectified 'other'? Although a seminal text, Michael Woolcock's paper on the attributes of the development studies student passes over these conundrums. Instead he proposes three roles:

- o 'Detectives' involved in data collection, analysis and interpretation;
- o 'Translators' who must reframe given ideas for diverse groups; and
- o 'Diplomats' responsible for negotiation, conflict mediation and deal making (Woolcock, 2007).

In this formulation development studies students, and perhaps their professors, exist to facilitate transition management (Woolcock, 2007).

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Although De Wet was writing about the role of anthropologists drawing on his experiences during the apartheid and immediate post-apartheid period, his typology more closely corresponds with my own views. De Wet also proposes multiple roles, but allows for greater independence of the researchers, who can be scholars, consultants, brokers, advocates, facilitators or collaborators (De Wet, 2001: pp. 19-20). As de Wet observes, each role has its prize and its price. Getting the balance right is key.

Colin Leys sums up the need to:

revive development theory, not as a branch of policy-oriented social science within the parameters of an unquestioned capitalist world order, but as a field of critical inquiry about the contemporary dynamics of that order itself, with imperative policy implications for the survival of civilized and decent life, and not just in the ex-colonial countries (Leys, 1996: p. 43).

Whose Development Studies?

As point of departure from which this can be done, the origins of development studies are worth considering. By this I mean identifying when research emerged that concerned the impact of social, economic and technological change, and which drew principally (but not exclusively) from the disciplines that comprise the social sciences and humanities. This is more than a matter of historical curiosity, since the origins of the field of study say a good deal as to where the development problem is to be found.

The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) was established in 1937 in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) following the Copperbelt mine workers' strike of 1935. Social anthropologist and founding director, Godfrey Wilson, described the work undertaken by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI), as a "contribution to the scientific efforts now being made in various quarters to examine the effect upon native African society of the impact of European civilization" (Wilson, 1940). Tembo (2014) proposes that the colonial administrators envisaged that RLI would provide the social science knowledge to ensure that the colony would be run efficiently, and further that the colonial administration would be "the main mechanism for putting the big scientific plan into operation" (Brown, 1979: pp. 533-534). However, the second director, South African born Max Gluckman, was openly anti-colonial and concerned with the social and cultural contradictions that resulted rather than with putting any imperial plan into action. He was eventually denied access to what was then Northern Rhodesia (Gordon, 2018).

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As an example of the type of research conducted by the Institute, in the late 1950s Elizabeth Colson was among the RLI researchers who studied the consequences of forced resettlement, effectively land theft, following the construction of the Kariba dam and hydro-electric plant (Schumaker, 2001). This is a project that exemplifies the type of research problems still undertaken in development studies. A member of the Manchester School of anthropology founded by Gluckman, her lecture given on the occasion of her receiving the Malinowski Award in 1985 describes the role of the applied anthropologist. This can readily be applied to the development studies student and differs significantly from the reactive roles proposed by Woolcock. Instead it emphasises the "ability to look at today in relation to something that lies ahead, that is not yet determined and that is subject to human thought and plan" (Colson, 1985).

Although there were other institutes that occasionally undertook similar research, this insight suggests that RLI can reasonably be proposed as a candidate for the first centre of development studies in the world. RLI was followed by the Makerere Institute of Social Research in 1948; the Institute for Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University in 1954; Institute for Social Research, University of Natal also in 1954; Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi in 1965. Only then was the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex established in 1966, which is now ranked as the top ranked centre in the world by the Times World Education Rankings. The Bureau for Social Scientific Research, later Institute for Social Development, was a relative latecomer and was established at UWC in the early 1970s.

Originally a non-teaching research unit, an early contribution of the Bureau was to provide data on poverty to the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group, more commonly known as the Theron Commission, that reported in 1976. Among the Commission's recommendations was that UWC should be permitted to enrol postgraduate students of all races.

The Bureau became a teaching institute in the 1980s with Prof Wolfgang Thomas as the first director and two academic staff members. Research activities included community profile studies on crime, substance abuse, unemployment and informal settlements. ISD drew the attention of the apartheid security forces, with the director being repatriated to Germany and two contract researchers tried for treason and jailed. It was just before these events that I first made contact with ISD when I approached Prof Thomas as a very junior lecturer to request that he examine a master's degree thesis.

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The second director, Prof Pieter Le Roux, continued with the Institute's research agenda on poverty and living conditions. The teaching programme in development studies was established at ISD in 1986 with five Honours students as its first intake. In July 1989 Pieter le Roux was one of the organisers of the important Lausanne conference at which economists representing the still banned ANC met for the first time with economists of the apartheid regime. At that time, I was a member of the Economic Trends Group, one of the progressive think tanks that sent a delegation to this meeting.

The following year Pieter le Roux and Vincent Maphai co-ordinated the Mont Fleur Scenarios, a foresight exercise to imagine South Africa in 2002. Brian O'Connell, then the Director of the Peninsula Technikon School of Education, was among future political leaders such as Tito Mboweni, Rob Davies (also at UWC at that time) and Trevor Manuel.

As already mentioned, in 1993 Pieter was also a co-investigator of the PSLSD. As one of the researchers involved in the implementation of this survey in what was to become the province of KwaZulu-Natal, I had many opportunities to interact with Pieter and learnt more about the work of ISD. I had decided then that I would like to become the director of the Institute.

Decolonising Development Studies

The concerns with the role of development studies permeated my inaugural lecture given at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2010. In this lecture I made reference to a study of the poverty researchers of the Victorian age: people such as Seebohm Rowntree and Charles Booth. Given the intransigent levels of poverty in South Africa after almost two decades of reform, I had become concerned that the portrayal of their work could apply to my own work and to that of others who had contributed towards the policy agendas of the immediate the post-apartheid era. That is:

social research and social policy derived essentially from professional and middle-class anxieties to maintain the stability of institutions by correcting the measured costs and inefficiencies of social wastage (McGregor, 1957).

How to resolve this unease was on my mind when I arrived at UWC, especially since my first task was to decide upon the best location for ISD. UWC does not have a faculty of Social Sciences and the degrees, students and staff of ISD straddled the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences.

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Brian O'Connell cleared a way forward for me. In July 2013 I attended a lunchtime talk on the contribution of the University to society to be given by the Vice-Chancellor. This presentation was part of a series of events leading up to UWC's signing of the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities. Brian's presentations were always interesting and richly illustrated. In this talk he presented a slide in which he posited two important components of the developmental role of the university:

To move people in developed countries to understand that they have lived beyond their means and they must prepare themselves for a more humble future.

To move people in developing countries to understand that they cannot use the developed nations as points of reference for their material expectations.

At that time I was revising the structure of all of the degrees that had been offered at ISD as part of the long process of consolidating a number of programmes into a single master's of Development Studies, with a feeder Honours programme and as the entry for a PhD in Development Studies. Brian's two points clarified for me that a key component of the revised programmes should focus on transitions that are structural systemic changes arising from interacting cultural, economic, technological, behavioural, ecological and institutional developments at multiple levels. These transitions apply equally to countries that are wealthy with well-developed infrastructure and institutions and in which extreme poverty has been eliminated, to countries that have endured the colonial exploitation and from which resources have been extracted, and to countries such as South Africa that although potentially wealthy, have high levels of inequality and in which extreme poverty persists.

This means that the task of the development studies students (and their professors) is to find ways in which transition can be stimulated towards a more desirable future. Along the way understandings will need to be formulated as to whose future should be prioritised, whose choices will be most influential, whose realities count, and whose development is at stake (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2003; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2007).

Recognising O'Connell's two points, the development studies degrees at UWC were revised to pose five value-rational questions as an overarching framework:

- o Where are we going?
- o For whom is this desirable?
- o What are the options and the possible end-points?

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- o What should be done?
- o Who will gain and who will lose?

In response to Flyvbjerg's (2012) call for social science to become useful, and in line with O'Connell's commitment to the engaged university, the points of departure for the modules that make up the Honours and master's programmes recognise that values, definitions, power, perspective and context matter. The case studies and analyses of policies and programmes that are discussed in the degree programme recognise this. Were we to not do so, we would risk being left with teaching bureaucratisation and technicalisation, and to allow our graduates to enter passive, and often compromised, roles as "diplomats, translators and detectives".

Motivated by O'Connell's presentation, the degrees at UWC require candidates entering the programmes to demonstrate competency in the theories and epistemology of their entry disciplines, whether these are from the natural sciences, social sciences or humanities. Critically, they need to show an understanding of how to apply and adapt this knowledge. On graduating, they should have achieved command of the theories and epistemology of development studies. This includes knowledge of critical social theory and development economics, and knowledge of at least one sub-field of development studies. The sub-fields offered within ISD include social policy; poverty and inequality studies; community development; urban and regional studies; development planning and management; and in 2017 migration and human mobility were added. Students can also take elective modules in UWC's School of Government, as well as in similar multi-disciplinary programmes such as Women's and Gender Studies.

Graduates are also expected to show the ability to independently design, implement, analyse and interpret a research project and a mini-thesis must be completed that makes up 50% of the overall evaluation. The thesis should show evidence of knowledge to engage with, critique and apply current research, policy and practices in development studies and competency in research methodology and academic writing skills.

Conclusion

We have a long way to travel before we can claim that development studies at UWC has been fully decolonialised from the purposes described by Brown noted earlier. However, the contribution made by Brian O'Connell

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helped bring this goal closer. He drew our attention to the unsustainable trajectories of wealthy countries, and the need for countries in which there is still extreme poverty not to seek to mimic these trajectories.

Robert Chambers proposed that development studies are “a way to present radical concepts in a technical guise” (Chambers, 2004: p. 5). Brian O'Connell's vision of an engaged university facilitated the adoption of this approach at UWC.

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