

Development sociology: A pioneer with an open future?

Dieter Neubert

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Challenges for development sociology

The title of the session “Development Sociology in Transition” implies the necessity of a reorientation or even a serious change. This is not the first invitation to self-reflection for development sociology. Already in 1993, a conference of the Section in Hannover asked: “Do we still need development sociology?” (Lachenmann 1995). This was a reaction to a paper presented by Ulrich Menzel in 1990 in Frankfurt on “The end of the Third World and the failure of the grand theories” published as a book in German in 1992 (Menzel 1992). Development sociology’s answer at that time was an “empirical turn”. Instead of abstract debates on development theories, the focus shifted to empirical micro- and meso-studies and mid-range theories. This was facilitated by the co-operation with social anthropology (Neubert 2001).¹ More than twenty years later, a new phase of self-reflection began. This time at a conference in Vienna in 2016 with the title “Social anthropology, sociology and development – taking stock”, followed by another conference again in Vienna in 2023 on “Knowledge production in and about development” leading to today’s session. Obviously, we are again in a process of self-reflection that seems to challenge the discipline in a fundamental way.

Here are some observations. This short history points at a peculiarity of development sociology. Whereas the subject of other sub-disciplines of sociology seems to be well described and quite stable, the topic of development sociology is less clearly defined and is subject to permanent change. The former “developing countries” became “underdeveloped countries” and now they are addressed as the “Global South”, often linked with a reference to unequal post-colonial structures. The claim for a “global sociology” (Burawoy 2008, 2015) asks for a sociology that leaves its North-Atlantic bias with its focus on Western Europe and North America. With this extended perspective, the Global South should become part and parcel of all sociological sub-disciplines. Thus, the wider perspective of development sociology beyond the North Atlantic is no longer unique. In a very promising *Handbook of Global Sociology* still in the making, only few development sociologists are involved (Balerdi et al. in preparation). Their findings on societies outside the North Atlantic realm seem not to be a core element of the new global sociology.

¹ This co-operation was not entirely new. The Section changed its name already in 1988 from “Development Sociology” to “Development Sociology and Social Anthropology”.

In general, the notion of development is losing attractiveness as a topic of research. There are now “new” theoretical, conceptual and political topics referring to the Global South such as ‘alternatives to development’ linked with the post-development debate (Esteva et al. 2013; Klein and Morreo 2019). They express a radical critique of Western capitalism and of the expropriation of indigenous communities. The topics of indigenous knowledge and epistemologies from the South challenge the claim of universalist science including a universalist sociology (Connell 2020 [2007]). The critique of global inequality points at post-colonial structures, colonial societies and promotes the concept of connected sociologies (Bhambra 2014). This all goes together with a critique of inequality in the international science system (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Alatas 2010).²

Development sociology a pioneer with limits and hidden strengths

From the perspective of development sociology, these topics are not really new. They reflect already empirically well researched fields in development sociology. The unequal North-South relations are the core of the dependency theories discussed since the 1960s. Together with the limitations of the classical modernisation theories, their shortcomings and simplifications were the topic of Menzel’s book on the *End of the Third World*. Indigenous knowledge was first researched in social anthropology followed by development studies and development sociology in the 1980s (Warren et al. 1989). The currently intensive debate on colonialism and worldwide inequalities beyond the dependency theories has been an ongoing issue in development sociology that also pointed at the Northern bias of the debate on globalisation. This led to a debate on African epistemologies in the 1990s (Hountondji 1994). It is remarkable that Hountondji, often cited as proof for a claim for an African epistemology, argues for just one rationality (Hountondji 1994, 2007). The critique of the notion of development and the post-development debate are part and parcel of development sociology since the 1990s. Since the ‘empirical turn’ in the 1990s, the aspiration of global sociology to integrate research on societies in the Global South has been a core element of development sociology (Neubert 2001).

However, development sociology seems to no longer be attractive. Former university positions for development sociology have changed their focus, development sociology hardly attracts students of sociology.³ Despite the claim for global sociology there are only very few sociology positions at German universities with a remit that point at or at least include the Global South (Neubert and Sabbi 2024, p. 227). We need to ask: Where does the decline in the importance of development sociology come from?

Development sociology is closely linked with the interdisciplinary fields of development studies, with the different area studies and has strong links to social anthropology but it is separated from mainstream sociology. Thus, development sociologists usually publish in journals for development studies or in the different area studies journals and hardly in the classic sociological journals. The term and the field of development sociology exists since the 1960s (Behrendt 1965; Frank 1967⁴) but it seems to be marginal in mainstream sociology. The German Section for Development Sociology was founded in 1972. Since then it has been a kind of exotic part of the German Sociological Association. This insignificant role of development sociology in sociology also seems to apply to UK and France. In both countries there is currently no specific section on “development sociology” in the sociological associations. Despite

² For a critical overview of these debates see Daniel and Neubert (2025).

³ Programmes on development studies with a component of sociology (e.g. in Vienna, Bayreuth or Friedensau) are still successful, partly because there is a demand from students from the Global South or Eastern Europe.

⁴ Also published in English and Spanish.

the more recent foundation of a section “sociology of development” in 2012 in the American Sociological Association (Cohn 2013), development sociology seems still to be a topic of minor interest in Europe and North America. Only in the International Sociological Association (ISA) with a membership from the Global South does the research committee “Social transformation and sociology of development” (founded in 1971) have a better standing.⁵

More important than the marginal position of development sociology in mainstream sociology are some shortcomings of development sociology itself. First, development sociology did not use its findings that contradicted the prevailing assumptions of the sociological canon for a critique of the North Atlantic bias in sociology. Second, development sociology has a wide experience of research in foreign languages and foreign socio-cultural settings. However, the existing knowledge on methods is mostly presented as part of the empirical studies. A more systematic discussion on methods is still an exception (e.g. Dannecker and Englert 2014). Third, development sociology has long-standing experience with co-operation with Southern institutions. However, very often this is not research on equal footing. Southern institutions, as in area studies or in development studies, are mostly just a junior partner (or even act only as research assistants) and the research topics are set by Northern institutions (Marchais et al. 2020). There is limited space for Southern topics. Northern researchers often do not see why these topics are important and the Northern funding institutions mostly follow the trends in the Northern debate. This is most obvious with regard to development issues that still are very important for Southern institutions and are seen as outdated in sociological research in the Global North (Neubert and Sabbi 2024, p. 216f.).

Development sociology has particular (often hidden) strengths. Most development sociologists have a regional focus. At the same time, the debates in development sociology are usually cross-area and comparative, not only as comparisons between the North Atlantic and one particular area in the Global South but also between different areas in the Global South. This usually includes comparisons between societies with different histories, different social structures and different political systems and economic structures.

The number of development sociologists has always been limited. Even when development sociologists have certain thematic preferences, a side-effect of the small number of development sociologists is that there is no clear separation according to sociological sub-disciplines. Thus, development sociology has a kind of overarching holistic perspective that encompasses various topics and analytical perspectives. This opens up access to social processes across disciplines and sociological sub-disciplines that otherwise might be overlooked. The result is a keen sensitivity to the similarities and differences between societies in the Global South. This goes hand in hand with a certain caution regarding simplistic generalisations and the preference for nuanced analysis based on empirical findings instead of seemingly obvious conclusions based on established theories.

Examples are the critique of the classic Marxist or Weberian class concepts based on control over the means of production and/or occupational status. There are cases where the simple dichotomy of working class and bourgeois class does not apply. We find a “bureaucratic bourgeoisie” controlling the resources of the state (Fanon 1968; Shivji 1976) or proletarianised peasants (Arrighi and Saul 1973). At least in Africa, occupational status and the means of production are often no longer criteria that define class. Most people rely on a combination of sources of income such as agriculture, wage income and/or self-employment. For political consciousness and political preferences, regional origin and/or ethnicity often are more important than occupation, and we also find increasing differentiation into different social milieus across different income groups (Neubert 2019, 2024; Stoll 2017, 2018). With regard to conflict

⁵ It was at that time one of the very first committees and was first named “Social practice and social change” (Jonassohn 1982).

studies, empirical findings point at multiple actors in conflict and show that for some of these actors war is not a problem to be solved but a business that needs to be kept running (Elwert et al. 1999; Elwert 1999). Studies in the Global South have identified the relevant role of informal economic activities, the so-called ‘informal sector’, that has been overlooked for a long time (Hart 1973; Elwert et al. 1983). In globalisation theory, empirical studies in the Global South have shown that globalisation is a process of dynamic interaction. Universally available goods are appropriated by local people in their own way (Binsbergen and Dijk 2004) in a process addressed as “glocalisation” (Robertson 1995). The still very prominent thesis of “good governance”, which implies that a democratic government is the best way to develop a country (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012), is often wishful thinking. Democratic governments may fail, and in other cases authoritarian systems can be successful. There is no clearly defined link between types of political systems and development or even political stability.

The future of development sociology

Development sociology needs to adapt to the new debates in sociology that reflect changes in the real world and in the global science system. This process, which is already under way, also includes new opportunities. One element is initiating a dialogue with the new strands in research and contributing empirical findings from development sociology. Especially the post- and decolonial debates have a strong programmatic character and are often conceptual and theoretical, relying on anecdotal empirical evidence or simplifying generalisations. Development sociology can contribute to an empirical examination of the applicability of concepts such as the colonial society. The studies by Quijano (2000) or Mignolo (2007, 2010) develop the concepts of colonial society and coloniality with regard to Latin American societies. These concepts also work for South Africa, North America or Australia. In the debate on decolonisation, the concepts of colonial society and coloniality are also applied to Asia or other African countries. Even though colonialism created a Western dominance, including massive inequalities and dependencies, we must examine whether the main features of a colonial society and coloniality actually apply. In most African or Asian societies we do not find an influential European colonial minority nor former slaves as in the Americas. Most of the population in Africa and Asia is ‘indigenous’. Inequality, power struggles and expropriation follow different patterns to those in the typical colonial societies and also reflect pre-colonial differences.

The still existing attraction of conventional development for large parts of the population in the Global South is hardly discussed in the debate on alternatives to development. The contributions to this debate focus on alternative projects and have a tendency to highlight selected successes mostly of small communities that have limited chances to offer a solution for a whole society. Even in these cases of success, the potential and real conflicts are overlooked or side-lined. Competing preferences with regard to community organisation often exist within the communities. As long as the alternative to development is just practised in a small community, those who do not follow the prevailing path simply leave the group or are excluded from it. This kind of relatively easy exit option hardly works for a whole society (Daniel and Neubert 2024). There are also alternatives to development, such as the Islamic state or jihadist movements, that are ignored in this debate. With regard to alternatives to development, a more profound and nuanced analysis is necessary.⁶

⁶ We should be careful not to romanticise self-organisation. A closer look at examples of self-organisation shows that there are not only cases of grassroots democracy but also authoritarian or even racist examples (Neubert 2021).

The debate on Southern epistemologies more or less openly implies a simplified North-South contradiction. However, very outspoken critical “Southern” voices are based in Northern institutions.⁷ At the same time, there are also voices in the South that support a universal scientific rationality (Hountondji 2007; Neubert and Sabbi 2024, p. 21f.). This important debate is not an expression of a fundamental North-South conflict but a question of different epistemologies. This is not at all new in sociology. It follows earlier debates with regard to phenomenology and constructivism with references to Husserl (1996), Schütz and Luckmann (1975), Berger and Luckmann (1966), the positivism dispute (Adorno et al., 1977), Kuhn’s (1970) paradigm revolutions, or Knorr-Cetina’s (1999) epistemic communities.

Current development studies tend to focus heavily on economics and political science analyses of large data sets, ignoring specific social conditions. Even when looking at specific country cases there is still a tendency to underline the role of good governance (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).⁸ Development sociology provides the aforementioned critique of the good governance thesis and offers the opportunity to bring society back into the debate on the basis of differentiated empirical findings.

Global sociology can profit from the rich empirical findings already existing in development sociology, and development sociology also offers the chance to situate specialist empirical data in the wider societal context. For further empirical studies, development sociology is a perfect partner to discuss methodological issues of research in different socio-cultural settings with different languages.

With regard to the worldwide massive inequality in knowledge production, development sociology can offer already established North-South co-operations. However, we need to avoid old mistakes. The goal is to develop an equal footing between financially strong and weak institutions, while also taking into account different research interests. For a real global sociology, we also need support for Southern researchers conducting research in foreign countries including the Global North.

This dialogue is just one path for the future of development sociology. There are also genuine research topics for development sociology beyond the current debates. First, we need an ongoing nuanced analysis and critique of development. This includes an inclusion of the hopes, expectations and disappointments of the population in relation to ‘development’. Another topic that will gain even more importance in the coming years is the role of the development industry between political instrumentalisation, expertocracy, voice for the poor and self-preservation. This especially includes the reaction and consequences on current massive budget cuts not only in the USA but in most of the important donor countries.

A second field is the systematic study of diversity of societies and their processes of change. The study of colonial society describes just one path. We also find autonomous modernisation as in the cases of Japan, Korea and Turkey to name but a few. We see alternative modernities in China, Malaysia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia or Iran. For some countries and parts of the population of the Global South these are attractive models. This underlines again that the Western paths to modernity – either capitalist or socialist – are only options among others. An important part of these processes of change are globally interconnected social movements not only for indigenous rights, democracy or ecology, but also Islamic or jihadist movements. This kind of research will lead to a nuanced global sociological understanding of history and an analysis of ongoing social change between global interconnection and local dynamics. Interestingly, this was also a topic of the Hannover conference in 1993, mentioned at the beginning. However, this core topic of sociology of development still waits to be systematically studied.

Against this background, at least in the long run there will be important changes for development sociology. This includes establishing a closer link to mainstream sociology as global sociology, contribu-

⁷ E.g. C. G. Spivak, C. T. Mohanty, J. and J. Comaroff, A. Escobar (all USA), H. K. Bhabha (UK) (Neubert and Sabbi 2024, p. 208).

⁸ An interesting exception is Dercon (2022) who shows that the political system is not the main factor but an elite that consequently opts for long-time development instead of short-time advantages. However, the social conditions for such an “elite bargain” are not examined.

ting to ongoing wider debates (dialogue) and sharpening the genuine topics of development sociology. They are organised along three main established strands of development sociology: Theories of development and socio-economic change, sociology of development policy and the development industry, and sociology of the societies of the Global South. Whether “development” is the central concept for these tasks is at least an open question.

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