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Whose development? Power and space in international development

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In recent years global attention on international development has coalesced around the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Introduced to replace the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) in 2015, the SDGs provide a dominant global framework for thinking about, implementing and measuring development until 2030. While the SDGs are lauded for approaching international development as a *global* concern and not simply something restricted to the global south (see Willis, 2016), issues of power and space continue to frame this field. Responding to these concerns, this article reflects upon the role of power and space in relation to who decides what development is and where development happens, who is represented as needing to undergo development, and who is positioned as having responsibility and agency for securing development. In so doing, this article shows how power matters in terms of understandings and representations of development (who is depicted, in what ways, and with what level of agency); space matters because of where development policy decisions are made – and about where – and development imagery constructed.

The Era of International Development

The era of international development is commonly understood as beginning with the President of the United States of America, Harry S. Truman's inaugural address in January 1949. In this speech, President Truman positioned the USA as a beacon of development, pre-eminent in knowledge, skills and resources, and thus obligated to help other countries realise this same standing and outcome by supporting processes of democratisation and modernisation (the full text of the address is available here: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13282>). Critics have pointed out that this framing of international development embedded particular spatialities, temporalities, and politics of development rooted in dominant power relations of the time and embodied a new form of (neo)colonialism and imperialism. As the post-development scholar Arturo Escobar (1999: 381) scathingly notes, the international development agenda grew from the "'discovery' of mass poverty in Asia, Africa and Latin America", exemplified in Truman's speech.

This identification of poverty in the global south as a problem to be tackled through interventions from the global north meant that the emergent development agenda sought to 'advance' and 'develop' the 'poor' by seeking to replicate the experiences and pathways of countries in the global north for those in the global south. As a result, the evolution of the international development

industry has been dominated by institutions, representational practices and policies located within and driven from the spaces of the global north. Consequently, the international development sector remains framed by a set of power relations which privilege the global north as having the ability and power to define who was classed as developed or not, the power to define what development means and how it is measured, and the power to control how development is done, by whom, to whom, and where (see Escobar, 1999).

This domination continues despite the existence of a range of development alternatives, often emerging from the global south. Latin American scholars have often been at the forefront of promoting alternative views of development. Key alternative development approaches include dependency theory, which argues that the global south remain on the periphery of technological and other advances and that countries in the global north continue to develop through exploiting and extracting resources from the global south (Harriss, 2014). More recently *buen vivir* (or 'good living') has emerged as a powerful development discourse tied to living in harmony amongst people and with the environment, prioritising collectivity and sustainability ahead of material production and consumption (Campodónico et al., 2017). Additional approaches include people-centred development (which prioritises meeting human need over economic growth) and the Capabilities Approach (which focuses on the realisation of an individual's functional capabilities or substantive freedoms in order to overcome poverty) (for a more detailed outline of different approaches to international development see Hanlin and Brown, 2013; Harriss 2014).

Despite these alternative theories, the power of Western theory and institutions has enshrined dominant global frameworks that reinforce modernisation-as-development through externally-driven, top-down development agendas. This tendency is evident in Mercer et al's (2003a) analysis of how the UK's New Labour government in the late 1990s and early 2000s sought to repackage a vision of international development – which was a neo-liberal, governance-focussed agenda – as being about 'partnerships' for development. Rather than building partnerships and sharing ownership of mutually-identified development goals, Mercer et al (2003a) argue New Labour's international development policy embodied a sense of colonial guilt and adopted a paternalistic, missionary ethos in framing development as happening 'out there' to those who need a 'hand-up' from the global north.

As the New Labour example illustrates, international development policy and practice are used as tools for promoting economic and political agendas of donors while simultaneously being a product of *and* re-inscribing power relations and representations of modernity and development. Thus, Overton et al (2013: 116) define development as the "processes and patterns of change amongst

countries and societies undergoing transformation as a result of interaction with, and adoption of, capitalism and modernity". While parallel, alternative modalities of development exist (see for instance Mawdsley, 2012), dominant development agendas remain rooted in the experiences and agendas of key bi- and multi-lateral donors from the global north. As post-structuralist scholars highlight, this dominance allows international donors to use development policies and funding as a means of representing and disciplining the 'other' and asserting privilege, power and ideology over them. Development aid is therefore frequently used as a political tool "to promote wider social, economic and political objectives ostensibly for recipients but also for donors. It involves... flows of resources from 'developed' to 'developing' countries in order to achieve defined economic and social outcomes" (Overton et al., 2013: 116) which are tied to (geo)political and economic agendas of donors (Mawdsley et al., 2014).

The introduction of the MDGs, and more recently the SDGs, has provided a broader framework through which international development efforts have been focussed and organised. While the MDGs may have "represented an unprecedented period of international agreement about what 'development' consist[ed] of" (Willis, 2016: 105; see also Overton et al, 2013: 118), Willis (2014: 60) reminds us of the power relations informed this agenda and the need to "recognise that definitions of 'development' are [still] far from neutral". For the MDGs, this remained evident in the language used in discussing development, the framing of development as goal or process, and the spatial framing of development as only affecting the global south (Willis, 2014, 2016). While the shift to the SDGs in 2015 has addressed some of these differentials through a more inclusive process of goal setting and in positioning the SDGs as a set of global challenges which need to be handled in contextually appropriate ways (Willis, 2016), popular views of international development continue to reinscribe a particular spatiality to international development.

The Spaces of Development

The dominant framing of development agendas relies upon and reproduces a spatial imaginary which is reinforced by the evolving terminology used to speak about development. From the 1950s and through much of the Cold War, the terminology of First World (capitalist countries of Western Europe, Scandinavia and North America), Second World (countries of the Communist bloc), and Third World (a term appropriated from the idea of the 'third estate' in France – the marginalised, impoverished common people prior to the French Revolution – and used to refer to the rest of the world (Payne, 2001: 6)) demarcated the spatialized understanding of development. These terms were then supplanted by modernist-framed language of the 'developed' and 'developing' world,

often depicted by the Brandt line which separated the globe based upon countries' GDP per capita. More recently, these terms are now being replaced by 'global north' and 'global south' (for an accessible debate on issues around such terminology see this World Bank blog:

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/should-we-continue-use-term-developing-world>).

Throughout these changes the language used to denote 'where' development is needed has continued to draw from the historical roots of development thinking and the dominance of Western-based development institutions (Willis, 2014). Consequently, the developmental experience of the global north continues to be positioned as the optimal path to development, entrenching ideals of modernisation-as-development and privileging economic growth as the foundation for development. At the same time, critics have argued that the continued mobilisation of ideas of developed and developing – however phrased – remains imbued with “racialized forms of power and inequality” which carry with them connotations of inferiority and superiority which reinforce representations and dichotomous understandings of 'us' (the developed) and 'them' (the developing) (Kothari, 2006).

Picking up on these concerns, Overton et al (2013: 121) argue that not only is the “legitimacy of aid... premised on a relatively static but increasingly problematic spatial dualism variously termed developed / developing, rich / poor, North / South, and minority / majority... The politics of aid echoes these divisions with important donor policy decisions often taking place in locations that are distanced from those most directly affected and therefore least able to influence those decisions”. Approaches to international development are thus marked by narratives and representations of who is 'developed' or in need of 'development', and of where 'development' needs to occur which entrench the dominant global order (Biccum, 2011). These narratives can be understood as expressions of power within development, deploying discourses and narratives to legitimate interventions, to discipline and govern the 'other' in need of development, and to assert the privilege and power of the donor. Thus, the spaces of development – understood not only as the offices of donors or recipient countries, but also the (media) spaces of representation of development – are spaces of power in the creation and maintenance of discourses of development (see Allen, 2004). As post-colonial theorists remind us, “the discourse of development is part and parcel of how a nation imagines itself and constructs its identity” through the reassertion of the home-nation as 'developed' and 'others' as 'un/under-developed' (Biccum, 2011: 1336; also Jazeel, 2012a). Representations of development thus become a means of asserting privilege, power and ideology in both official and everyday engagements around development concerns that continue to draw upon an assumed spatiality of development. Such practices are expressions of power and can perpetuate negative stereotypes about the global south.

Power and Politics in Representing Development

The rooting of international development in a spatial division feeds in to broader representational practices and understanding. Commonly these practices are understood as marking a difference between 'us' and 'them' (or 'the other'), drawing upon a repertoire of categorisations and representations to produce – in a symbiotic process – two groups; those like us and those different to us (Said, 1978; for an accessible introduction to Said's work see Jazeel 2012a). Popular engagement with international development (and the global south more generally) is often fuelled by and reliant upon this sense of othering; as Mercer et al (2003a: 422) note British media representations of Africa classically "reduce Africa to a series of stereotypes of chaos and disaster and also to prescribe a new form of colonisation based on guided development" (see also Hammett, 2014).

Exposure to representations of the global south has grown as the rise in use of ICTs has meant citizens are "increasingly... aware of global issues" (Biccum, 2011: 1332) and development actors are increasingly using different media to promote their activities and raise funds for their campaigns. Key to these practices, for many development-sector charities, has been the use of advertising materials in both print and broadcast media campaigns. Reflecting on the content of such materials provides an opportunity to analyse the discourses of development being presented, and to question how these practices continue to inscribe particular power relations and spatial understandings of development.

A key concern is therefore how development charities represent the global south. Critics have identified a tendency amongst development charities to present simplistic and/or sensationalist representations of the 'impoverished other' (sometimes with worrying resonance with colonial-era representations of people from the global south as dangerous/lazy/infantile 'others' (Mercer et al., 2003b)). The repeated representation of such a stereotypical representation serves to reinscribe particular perceptions and assumptions, entrenching power relations, stereotypes of people, places and spaces, dehumanise those depicted and embody the spaces of power that determine what and where development is (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). These frames are themselves embodiments of and constituent elements of a broader framework of values and understandings which rely upon a commonly understood set of meanings and which can derive from and reinforce negative and offensive stereotypes (Vossen et al., 2016). Thus, when thinking about questions of space and power in international development it is crucial to ask how places and peoples are scripted and represented

to determine who is in need of and is 'deserving' of development, and who is depicted as having the agency to deliver this (Overton et al., 2013).

In presenting representations of development need, the viewer is often cast "in the role of spectator" who can choose to intervene and solve the development problems of others (Müller, 2013: 475). This positioning not only strips agency from the recipient but can reify a paternalistic, white saviour approach to development while failing to address geopolitical and economic structures which underpin inequalities in economic development and social justice (Biccum 2011). Instead, these practices often depict humanitarianism in a way that "not only masks the underlying dynamics of power and social and economic relations... but at the same time manufactures a truth about 'Africa' and other places perceived as destitute that legitimises the global hegemonic system and removes its victims 'from the everyday realities of the western world'" (Muller, 2013: 471)

In recent years such critiques of the representational practices have argued that "the representation of the global South is overly negative and one-sided in stereotyping people from the South as miserable, passive and helpless" (Vossen et al., 2016: 2). This argument is evident in the ethos and aims of the Radi-Aid Awards (www.radiaid.com), a set of awards made to the best and worst development adverts each year. Organised by the Norwegian Students and Academics' International Assistance Fund, the Radi-Aid awards seek to challenge the ways in which the global south is represented in international development fundraising.

While recognising that fundraising materials for international development are driven by market logics (Bhati and Eikenberry, 2016), the Radi-Aid awards challenge unjust, stereotypical and harmful representations which reinscribe ideas of 'us' and 'them', dividing and distancing the 'developed' West from the 'undeveloped' South in ways which reaffirm dominant power dynamics. Such practices are not new; the Band Aid single and music video in 1984 is critiqued for providing a "representation of famine [that] was instrumental in establishing a hegemonic culture of humanitarianism in which moral responsibility towards impoverished parts of an imagined 'Africa' is based on pity rather than the demand for justice" (Müller, 2013: 470). Adopting the 'victim frame' commonly seen in development fundraising videos, Band Aid focussed upon suffering and poverty in order to mobilise empathy and a sense of moral obligation (see Vossen et al, 2016). However, this approach – which is popularly critiqued as 'poverty porn' – often strips away the dignity, power and agency of those represented, presenting the global south as passive recipients in need of 'upliftment' by 'superior' Western donors (Vossen et al., 2016).

Recipients of the Rusty Radiator award in the Radi-Aid awards frequently adopt this victim frame approach, using both visual and audio content to magnify ideas of pain and suffering and the

dependency of the recipient upon the largesse of the donor in order to achieve ‘development’ or ‘improvement’ (Vossen et al, 2016). These practices seek to provoke empathy and moral guilt while positioning the viewer in a position of superiority and infantilising the global South under the paternalistic gaze of the global North with the subjects of these representations denied agency and dignity (Bhati and Eikenberry, 2016). These practices are clearly evident in recent Rusty Radiator award winners, including Ed Sheeran’s 2017 Red Nose Day appeal video which focussed upon Sheeran meeting with street children in Liberia. Condemned by the judging panel as “literally poverty tourism” (<https://www.radiaid.com/rusty-radiator-award-2017/>), the video is focussed on Sheeran and strips away the dignity and agency of the street children he speaks with. Similarly, the 2017 runner-up, Tom Hardy’s appeal for the Disasters Emergency Committee for the Yemen crisis which was deemed to be “Devoid of dignity to those suffering” (www.radiaid.com/rusty-radiator-award-2017/). In 2016, Compassion International’s ‘The wait is over’ video was judged as “promot[ing] deep-rooted perceptions of Western superiority over the South. It reinforces the white savior complex, and depicts that there is nothing the parents can do for their children other than to wait for the sponsor who can save their lives and their future” (www.radiaid.com/rusty-radiator-award-2016/). A common theme across the winners of the Rusty Radiator awards are repeated, stereotypical representations which not only engrain assumptions about the global south and development and reproduce the social order of who is powerful and who is weak (Crewe and Fernando, 2006).

In contrast, the Golden Radiator winners are celebrated for debunking stereotypical views of the global south and placing emphasis on the agency and voice of peoples from the global south. The 2017 Golden Radiator recipient, Oaktree’s ‘I must not make assumptions’ provides a strong example of such practices. Opening up as if a stereotypical development fundraising video, the narrator constantly questions the footage being presented and in a satirical manner highlights criticism of poverty porn in to the content being shown. The narration of the evolving quest – within the video – to present a stereotypical image of development simultaneously explains how stereotypical frames are produced and reinforced while debunking this process to argue that we ‘must not make assumptions’.

These forms of representation matter in development (fundraising), as it is often those most lacking in voice – and the assets needed for their voice to be heard – who are most affected, and who are further marginalised by inequitable power relations and a lack of control over the tone and language of representation used when talking about development (Hickey and Bracking, 2005). The dominant framing of development within the Rusty Radiator winners tends to silence the voices of development recipients, frequently framing development in terms of charity rather than (social)

justice (Cameron, 2015) linked to discourses and representations of the ‘needy’ other and continued power relations which locate us and them, and which continue to draw upon a specific spatiality of development (in terms of *where* decisions are made, *where* development is seen to happen). The Golden Radiator winners, on the other hand, can be seen as opening up the spaces in which development is talked about in ways which move beyond both worthy-but-dull news coverage or promotional videos which re-entrench outdated and prejudicial cultural reservoirs of knowledge about the global south. Instead, such content can be used to help us question how space and power are implicit in understandings of development, while encouraging people to think in more cosmopolitan ways and engage with an ideal of common humanity and responsibility to distant others.

Representation, responsibility and development

The power of representation remains a critical and problematic aspect of international development, bound up in broader spatial and power dynamics. A key challenge in talking about and representing development remains overcoming legacies of colonialism and promoting understandings of interconnections across scale and distance. Within these concerns is a need for greater responsibility to be exercised in terms of representations of development in terms of who creates representations, whose voices are heard or dominate these representations and to recognise spaces of representation as moments and expressions of power relations and hierarchies.

To produce a sustainable shift in representations of and interventions for development, there have been calls for moves towards social justice-based approaches and a caring for distant others that is based in a sense of cosmopolitanism. This form for responsibility requires a step-change in understanding and a move away from understanding development as charity – and recipients as agency-less subjects – and towards ideas of social justice and of development concerns as outcomes of continued, everyday structural inequality and injustice (Lawson, 2007). To begin this process, we can think about development as a global concern linked to the ways in which (in)justices are produced through spatial inter-relations which connect distant lives in ways that reproduce (in)equality (see also Massey 2004). Thus, Lawson (2007) talks of connecting an ethics of care to a politics of responsibility which involves critical reflections on the relations and representations of self and other (of developed and developing (see Kothari, 2006) to identify how these structures frame our perceptions, practices and experiences. Taking this further, Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo (2009) argue that notions of responsibility and care can allow us to develop both a more ethical geography and greater understanding of relationality and interdependence which allows for greater

recognition of and responses to continued inequalities and inequities. Specifically, they argue that rather than thinking about instilling an ethic of care for 'distant others', a more productive approach is to recognise how 'other' lives are proximate to our own due to multiple interdependencies (including (neo)colonialism) (also Young, 2003).

Space, Power and Responsible Representation

Space and power remain vital aspects in thinking critically about the field of international development. While the introduction of the SDGs has led to a degree of rescaling and respatialising understandings of development, popular perception remains of development happening 'out there' in the global south. This understanding is informed by the dominant power relations framing international development policy, practice and representation which are rooted in a series of interconnected spaces. These spaces include those locations where key development organisations are based, the spaces where development narratives are produced and consumed, and the spaces in which development is assumed to be needed. Drawing from literatures on media and representation, as well as on post-colonialism and geographies of responsibility, we can begin to develop critical engagements with how development is represented and understood, and the role of power and space in (re)producing these narratives.

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