THE COMPULSION TO DO THE RIGHT THING: DEVELOPMENT KNOWLEDGE AND ITS LIMITS

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Introduction

Recently the World Bank launched a new initiative to ensure the effectiveness of its aid to so-called developing countries by strengthening the ability of civil society to demand accountability from governments. It is called “Global Partnership for Social Accountability” (World Bank 2012, see also 2005; McNeil and Malena 2010). The initiative assumes that the accountability of governments before their own society is crucial to the success of policies.¹ In the same breath it further assumes that most developing countries lack accountability. An interesting aspect of this initiative is that it involves several international organizations ranging from development agencies to academic institutions, all of which have committed themselves to investing financial and intellectual resources to helping developing countries overcome this particular deficit. The current financial commitment of the World Bank is around US $20 million, but over the next seven years the project is expected to benefit hit US $75-125 million. The stakes are high and it is clear that the World Bank and its partners mean business.

But what kind of business do they mean, and most of all, what does it tell us about the state of aid policy in these days and, in particular, the kind of knowledge on which it is based? On the face of it, it would seem that the international aid apparatus seems to have identified one of the most important weak spots of the operational aspects of the aid architecture. It may have been many years since, but Amartya Sen’s seminal work (1992) on the correlation between democracy and development outcomes, and especially, the emphasis which he placed on the importance of accountability as engineered by freedom of expression, seems to be receiving further acknowledgement from the World Bank. On second thoughts, however, there may be some reason for caution in

¹ This has in fact become the standard credo of political commentary on the failure of development (see in this respect Jha et al. 2011; Arien 2010)
drawing such a conclusion. The Global Partnership for Social Accountability will pour money into civil society organizations which design and implement programs that help communities in developing countries to hold their governments accountable. Some of these programs entail the critical evaluation of service delivery in those areas which are of more immediate concern to broader sections of the population of developing countries, namely health and education. What is remarkable about such a form of intervention, however, is the extent to which in acknowledging the failure of polities it seems to assume that interventions of a technical nature may be an adequate substitute for the messy, slow and often dirty and inefficient practices of normal politics. To put it differently, the initiative appears to document one particular problem of the kind of knowledge which is produced in development policy. Development knowledge assumes for every problem there is a technical solution. Indeed, the assumption is even far more reaching. The integrity and plausibility of development knowledge rests on the belief that it has a vocation which consists in translating problems of a political nature into technical problems requiring technical solutions.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss these assumptions. The paper will focus on the nature of development knowledge to argue that it is based on epistemological assumptions that render it unable to contribute towards a real understanding of the changes that are currently taking place within the African continent as well as to assess the challenges and opportunities which arise for Africa in view of the increasing multipolarity of the world today. Africa’s current economic boom (see for example Miguel 2009) as well as the emergence of new donors such as China and Brazil (Taylor 2006; Brautigam 2009; Cheru and Obi 2010) pose real challenges to received wisdom in development policy and practice while at the same time demanding a reassessment of its underlying assumptions. I will claim that the problem with development knowledge is its teleological nature. It uncritically assumes that “development” is not only the goal, but also the fate of every country in the world. In other words, development knowledge has proclaimed development as a norm in the evaluation of historical change around which it seeks to render the world intelligible. To be sure, the assumptions underlying development knowledge have generated, and given substance to, much intellectual debate since the institutionalization of aid a few years after the Second World War. I contend, however, that these debates fell short of a critical engagement with the epistemological shortcomings under-