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Author(s): Helen Hintjens

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The Emperor's New Clothes: a moral tale for development experts?

Helen Hintjens

While global problems of poverty, inequality, and social upheaval are on the increase, the language used by development agencies and development experts sounds increasingly radical and idealistic. New socio-political conditions have been borrowed from real contexts in the South, only to be re-imposed on Southern 'partners'. Notions like empowerment, participation, and governance are paradoxically enforced through top-down, external intervention. Hans Christian Andersen's parable of the Emperor's new clothes highlights the illusory nature of this re-packaging of development policies in the 1990s. One major difficulty is that micro- and meso-level socio-political conditionalities remain subordinated to macro-level economic liberalisation.

They look participatory from a distance, but at close quarters these measures ... have effectively become new forms of management and control, which are just as costly [as the old methods] but do not result in great benefits to project participants. (Craig and Porter 1997:50, commenting on the current vogue for mainstreaming of participation in development projects)

Beautiful images of the high goals of the official development discourse and deep internal turbulence were clearly interdependent ... [but] contradictions between the discourse of goals and means and what is actually being achieved may not be visible any more. (Quarles van Ufford 1995:4, 12–13, 14)

Introduction: skirting round the Emperor

The central theme of Hans Christian Andersen's story of the Emperor's new clothes is that illusion depends at least in part on self-deception on the part of those being deceived. The Emperor and his courtiers pretend he is wearing clothes because they do not wish to appear foolish; in the end they look more so. Sometimes in real life too, the rich pretend not to see what is obvious to the poor and marginalised. The naked truth may be denied. In the context of contemporary development theory and practice, the story appears most revealing (*sic*), as just such a situation of self-deception seems to exist.

Hans Christian Andersen's story captures the power of fashions and trends in development practice. It points to the hazards in always wishing to be as up-to-date as possible. Even before the latest fads are translated into practice, they are already being challenged by new concepts that seek to replace them. Development professionals, generally well-meaning

individuals, seem genuinely to believe they can overcome the failures of the past through redesigning development interventions and reinventing the language of development.

In practice, can new ingredients be added until the perfect development cake is baked? To use another analogy, it is claimed that development soap can wash cleaner and cleaner (and whiter and whiter). Unfortunately, the smell is becoming more and more fishy! As development practitioners use increasingly flowery language despite evidence of ever-grittier realities, one is left wondering why this might be. The same strange juxtaposition has been observed in other 'caring' professions too, including social work and psychiatry, which makes the matter all the more intriguing. This article uses the Emperor story to try to explain why the rhetoric and reality of development appear to be drifting further apart than ever, in spite of attempts to bring development closer to the grassroots.

With economic globalisation, the livelihoods of millions of us can be made, unmade, and shifted about, sometimes in a matter of seconds, through cyberspace communications. Concrete material improvements in welfare, health, and consumption levels for millions of people prove very difficult within the structures of the existing global economy. In 1999, the Emperor of Development stands naked in front of the forces of the global market. Behind him are an unimpressed crowd of onlookers, mainly the poor of the South who still hope for so much from development. To say the least, the present global context is not favourable to the whole development project. In this context, the unshakeable commitment of many development professionals to project and programme-based development interventions resembles a religious faith rather than a rational set of policies.¹

Since the 1980s, development policies have increasingly emphasised the need for these to be aimed at intermediate, community-level structures. An emphasis on bottom-up, empowerment-oriented development can be equated with the rise of the social development approach. In the face of growing economic insecurity, intensified exploitation, and legalised segregation in the developing world, some have argued that the orthodox, things-oriented development models of early post-war decades really are giving way to more holistic and human-centred approaches (Chambers 1995). Are these just fashionable new clothes which seek to compensate for a loss of confidence? Or does the claim to be wearing these transparent new clothes seek to distract attention from the underlying continuity in development policies, which continue to favour economic globalisation and the removal of remaining barriers to global capital movements?

The opening quotation from Craig and Porter suggests that in spite of the poverty focus of many contemporary aid programmes, the poor will gain little from more bottom-up and participatory approaches unless there are also material improvements in their daily lives. In this article, it will be argued that the ritualistic imposition of socio-political conditionalities can even make matters worse. After examining development thinking and practice up to the 1990s, and the role of social development experts, we explore the story of the Emperor's new clothes in more detail. At the end of the article, the example of democratisation in Africa is briefly considered. For poor people, even democracy can be 'a legitimisation of their disempowerment', since 'their alienation from power and their oppression are no longer as visible as problems inviting solution' (Ake 1995:70). The same can be true of the other forms of socio-political conditionality which are currently in vogue.

The context: professionals' approaches to Development

As John Maynard Keynes taught us, practitioners are bound to interpret and judge the reality around them through the concepts and ideas they learned while in training. They may be

using theories they are not even fully aware of knowing, or think they have long ago forgotten. This is as true today as when Keynes noted it in the 1930s.

Most development professionals today trained at a time when Marxist and neo-Marxist accounts of developmental change and human action were dominant in universities. Such theories were regarded as virtually moribund by the 1990s, with what seemed like a heady (though now somewhat shaky) post-communist consensus after the end of the Cold War. It seems strange and regrettable that 'capitalism is disappearing from Left discourse ... at the moment of its global triumph' (Waterman 1996:178–179). A class-based analysis has the merit of recognising that the price of capitalist development may well include enormous social upheavals and may intensify conflicts of all kinds. If anything, this seems an ideal moment for class-based analysis, given the substantial evidence of growing inequalities of income and wealth both within and between countries.² For Marxists or neo-Marxists, deliberate development intervention can only generate major improvements in poor people's lives if it is accompanied by revolutionary change.

Neo-liberals still maintain that left-wing and socialist protectionist and welfare policies are stifling free-market capitalism. Government intervention is said to diminish the market's ability to allocate resources efficiently. Governments are said to be dominated by irrational concerns with national security, full employment, welfare, and redistributive taxes, all of which hamper private commercial and business interests. Neo-liberals believe that equality of opportunity is needed to ensure allocative efficiency, but tolerate a high degree of social inequality, since this is seen as one of the natural consequences of market competition.

Since both neo-liberals and neo-Marxists reject the status quo in favour of some other ideal, it is perhaps not surprising that they tend to be more highly critical of development assistance than those who place themselves neither on the left or the right of the political spectrum (Watkins 1994).

All schools of thought generally agreed by the late 1980s that there was a serious crisis in development theories and practices. For Marxists and neo-liberals, this spelled the end of development as an ideological and political project. The response of many development professionals has been gradually to adopt a more centrist, or populist, position. For development professionals working in 'social development', for example, development interventions are regarded as legitimate to the extent that they support the spontaneous efforts of marginalised communities to improve their lot. Working through local NGOs and grassroots movements is supposed to ensure that development interventions will be more 'relevant' to the poor and excluded (Edwards 1989).

Many Marxist commentators dismissed such ideas as populist and reactionary (for an interesting example, see Brass 1995), but by the late 1980s, grassroots-oriented populist approaches were being translated into practice in the form of new aid conditionalities adopted by major donor agencies. The implications of this are discussed in the following two sections.

Development discourse and the incorporation of dissent

Many of the concepts recently taken on board by development professionals now form part of a new centrist orthodoxy. Originally terms like participation, empowerment, gender equality, and democratisation were rallying cries of the Left and of radical mass social movements, particularly in Latin America, but also in Asia and Africa. While such concepts are now mostly fully incorporated into officially sanctioned development policies, the original radicalism of related practices has been largely ignored. In being incorporated into bureaucratic norms and conditions, and being uprooted from their original political contexts, many of these terms have lost their bite, and become increasingly vague and disembodied.³

Aid programmes are progressively more concerned with achieving intangible goals, which are gradually coming to override earlier concerns with 'goats and water' (as a development professional put it dismissively in a recent e-mail about one central African country). Yet ostensibly the main goal of development interventions has always been to improve people's daily lives in material terms. If this is no longer the aim, then it is difficult to see what such intervention is all about. Many projects are becoming increasingly abstract in their objectives, and include such goals as social transformation or capacity-building which are difficult to verify objectively. It seems only a matter of time before some agency incorporates 'the right to dream' into their conditions for funding of project proposals! This would require the recruitment of a whole new category of experts on 'dreaming in development', and would not conflict with the continuation of macro-economic free-market policies.

The elusiveness of the concept of development has long been one of its strengths, as well as a fatal weakness. The same is true of other terms, like participation. As Sarah White observes, 'it is in the ambiguity of participation, both as a concept and practice, that the scope for its colonisation lies' (White 1996:8). Similarly, words like empowerment, good governance, civil society, or democracy can imply a huge range of different realities and ideas. In recycling the language of grassroots social movements, aid agencies have jettisoned most of the radical practices associated with such language in particular settings (including land reform, for example). Even the World Bank now insists that participation should be mainstreamed in all Bank-funded projects. Participation, empowerment, and governance have become a new orthodoxy, suggesting that in the politics of development, as elsewhere, 'incorporation rather than exclusion is often the best means of control' (*ibid.*:7).

Development trends in the 1990s

In the 1990s, the middle-of-the-road position appears to have become widely accepted in development thinking and practice. Neo-liberal economic policies none the less remain dominant at the level of macro-economic development interventions. Many of the guidelines, frameworks, checklists and criteria used by major development NGOs, government agencies, and multilateral institutions now specify the need for more people-centred, rights-based, and locally sustainable forms of development intervention. Yet macro-economic policies have not changed substantially since the late 1970s, remaining ardently neo-liberal—a strange disjuncture that has lasted many years.

A broadly populist approach and pro-free-market policies are incompatible in many ways. The former generally favours equalisation between rich and poor, and between men and women; the latter may even welcome social inequalities as an outward sign of healthy specialisation. A centrist notion of citizenship includes economic and social as well as civil and political rights, whereas neo-liberals tend to divorce the latter from wider economic and social conditions. Neo-liberal ideology is unconcerned with empowerment for marginalised groups, and would interpret participation in its narrowest sense to mean the right to vote and the right to take part in market exchange.

There are points of correspondence as well. Structural adjustment policies (SAPs) obviously constrain the effective sovereignty and self-reliance of Third World states. Similarly, though less obviously, socio-political conditionalities may undermine the autonomy of local communities and social groups. The commodification and marketing of people's informal associative activities, for example, can deprive community-level organisations of the autonomy needed to enable their members collectively to escape poverty.⁴ The incorporation of community-based organisations (CBOs) into top-down economic liberalisation policies may undermine these organisations' abilities to meet their own members' needs.

Some forms of socio-political conditionality may appear progressive or radical including, for example, intervention within the household to tackle gender inequalities. But even such well-meaning interventions tend to encroach on the hinterland of people's own collective and individual survival strategies. Fragile livelihoods can be threatened, creating new conflicts, and even resulting in violent repression. Support for civil society, for example in the form of support for NGOs, may simply facilitate marketisation and control of various informal sector activities, including those oriented towards survival. In the process, the poor may become even more vulnerable, and may be disempowered rather than empowered.

The potentially positive and liberatory content of new socio-political conditionalities is obviously conveyed in such terms as democracy, good governance, human rights, gender equity, participation, and empowerment. Yet the noblest sentiments can wither under the heat of the harsh realities of market competition. SAPs have already forced most governments worldwide to remove protections on people's basic livelihoods, including subsidies, minimum wages, and price controls, even on basic necessities like food. The state is no longer to be held accountable for ensuring that citizens' basic needs are met; instead private citizens, individually and collectively, are expected to provide for themselves, however poor or disadvantaged they may be. More and more people are excluded from mainstream economic activity, apparently surplus to market requirements. In neo-liberal theory, inequality is regarded as a quasi-natural state of affairs, and not the outcome of deliberately unfair policies. Free-market economic rationality is given priority over any other forms of rationality, including those based on notions of justice or state legitimacy.

The present world order resembles a form of global apartheid in which the basic rights of most of humanity are denied by international systems of trade, investment, migration control, and information flows (Alexander 1996). In this context, there are pressures on donor agencies to submit to the competitive forces of economic globalisation and restructuring. Their operations and employment practices increasingly resemble those of multinational companies operating under a situation of oligopoly, albeit on a more modest scale. Brand names become increasingly important markers in the search for funding and a 'market niche'. This implies that fashions in development practices and conditionalities may arise from the need to confront competitors, and the need marginally to differentiate one's own development agendas from those of other agencies and institutions. Firoze Manji argues that marketing strategies adopted in the NGO sector have resulted in the 'depoliticisation of poverty' (Manji 1998:28; see also White 1996).

A strange, symbiotic relationship has emerged between socio-political and qualitative conditionalities. On the one hand, grassroots organisations and social movements have undoubtedly influenced development theorists and practitioners to make their interventions more 'relevant' to the real world. On the other hand, socio-political conditionalities do not seriously contest neo-liberal economic policies. Indeed, the new socio-political conditionalities can appear like bandages wrapped around a sickly body, unable to disguise the terminal illness of development (Quarles van Ufford 1995).

Enter the social development experts

Most donors' and NGOs' criteria for assessing, monitoring, and evaluating projects have been completely overhauled and revised since the early 1980s. Qualitative socio-political objectives are constantly being added to the more conventional quantitative targets. The need to measure the attainment of new development criteria has meant recruiting new categories of development experts. Briefly consider the position of the social development experts.

Currently, aid conditionalities are becoming more complex and vague. Objectives are no longer expressed solely in terms of numbers of vehicles, goats, classrooms, trained personnel, or kilometres of road. Appraisal, monitoring, and evaluation methods have therefore had to be adapted to suit the new conditionalities. Social development professionals are those thought able to assess the broadly 'socio-cultural' and institutional outcomes of development projects and programmes.

In the UK in the 1990s, the growth of social development expertise was linked with the appearance of the new socio-political conditionalities. The Overseas Development Administration (ODA), now re-named the Department for International Development (DFID) employed a growing number of professionals classified as social development advisers. The number expanded from two or three in the late 1980s to more than 50 today; similar processes are at work in many other development agencies. The job of this rapidly growing cadre of experts is to advise policymakers on how to translate socio-political aid conditionalities in practice, and how to assess the outcomes. Social development experts usually specialise in a number of fields, including gender planning, microcredit and microenterprise, participatory methodology, poverty assessments, capacity-building and institution-building, and sustainable urban and rural livelihood strategies.

In the North, most social development professionals work outside government, in universities, private consultancy firms, and NGOs. A growing number are women, and a growing number are self-employed, freelance consultants with fairly loose institutional attachments. Only a tiny minority are nationals of developing countries actually recruited in the UK. When nationals are recruited in aid-recipient countries, they are almost always paid a fraction of what expatriates receive, for exactly the same work. Sometimes the 'Southern partner' is not even paid for his or her expertise, doing much of the fact-finding for 'expertriates' on the basis of friendship and good manners.

In a relatively short time, social development has become quite a sizeable sub-branch of the development business. In giving advice, social development experts will tend to conclude that there are signs of success, but that more needs to be done to make actors involved more sensitive to socio-cultural factors in the development process. Sometimes, training is recommended, and the social development expert or his or her institution may be offering to provide this training, using part of the project budget to do so. This reinforces the perception that what is needed is more social development expertise. As this cycle repeats itself, the 'myriad procedures and requirements now part of the process of project design and approval' absorb a growing share of development funding (Uphoff 1990:1401). However modest social development experts may be as individuals, their interventions tend to have fairly intangible results. This contrasts with the very tangible and immodest cost of such interventions. As an increasingly diverse basket of expertise is demanded to oversee the widening scope of operational activities covered by development agencies, the costs of technical assistance appear to be rising as a proportion of the total aid budget. Technical assistance is now one of the major form of tied aid, costing an estimated US\$12 billion per annum in the early 1990s (Watkins 1994:521).

Most development research is commissioned as part of the policy process in order to support one policy argument against another. There is now a real danger that consultants, academics, and other development experts will tend to produce what is asked of them. Providing policymakers with 'timely intelligence on key topics' (Booth 1995:294) does not allow much room for tackling wider political and ethical issues which may none the less be critical to understanding how development policies are operating on the ground. The danger is that, 'enmeshed in the techniques and administration of proprietary research, perceptive and well-meaning individuals may lose sight of the larger issues at stake' (Samoff 1992:74).

There is also the danger that individuals lose the right to publish what they have researched, so that knowledge becomes confined to a charmed circle with access to the 'grey literature' contained in policy documents and consultancy reports.

Like the courtiers of the Emperor, social development experts may be vulnerable to self-delusion when it comes to what they are seeing at work in the real world of development. They may also overestimate their own control over the use to which their work is put. Many social development experts appear to be well aware, however, of the connection between socio-political conditionalities and wider economic conditionalities involving privatisation, deregulation, retrenchment, and cost-sharing. Some go so far as to celebrate the natural affinity between market freedoms and civil and political freedoms, even though there is no theoretical or empirical basis for this association.

On the global scale of things, what social development experts are saying is less important than how their advice is being put to use in the policy process. If advice is being used to legitimate policy decisions and development interventions that worsen the position of the 'poor and vulnerable', then it is hard to see any moral justification for involvement in such work. Social development becomes just a sub-branch of the development business (Samoff 1992; Watkins 1994; Ake 1995).

The point here is not about ill will or cynical self-interest. These may exist, but on the whole it is likely that the development profession includes quite a high proportion of idealistic, hard-working, and committed individuals. Many development professionals could probably earn higher financial rewards in other professions. Social development experts would generally describe themselves as facilitators of others' development and empowerment, rather than seeking power themselves. They often despair at the bureaucratic, top-down operations of the donor agencies, and still tend to exhibit what Brass calls 'a quasi-mystical belief in the efficacy of any/all discourse/action-from-below' (Brass 1995:521). Robert Chambers' work would be just one example of this. One danger, however, is that repeated use of terms like empowerment, gender equity, and human rights can cultivate an unreal, not altogether healthy, aura of virtue around the person of the social development expert.

This brings us back to the Emperor and his new clothes, and to some more detailed reference to Hans Christian Andersen's fable. This story was chosen because of an apparently strong resemblance between its themes and many of the dilemmas in current social development policy and practice

At last the Emperor's New Clothes!

In the tale of the *Emperor's New Clothes*, two swindlers arrive in town with a plan to make money without producing anything. Their scheme is to take advantage of the Emperor's vanity, and to exploit the fawning behaviour and mutual distrust of his courtiers and other hangers-on. The two tailors claimed to be able to sew a:

most marvellous cloth. Not only were the colours and patterns of their material extraordinarily beautiful, but the cloth had the strange quality of being invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or unforgivably stupid. (Andersen 1995:1)

The vagueness of their description compares with the vagueness of many of the qualitative objectives of the current social development orthodoxy, and resembles the inflated promises and expectations placed on many forms of socio-political conditionality. From Andersen's story, it is obvious the Emperor was a dandy, keen to keep up with fashions and fads. A similar sense of unreality is heightened by the sheer speed with which one set of development conditions and requirements is replaced by another. We can be almost certain that the present

development orthodoxy will not last for long. Like 'other general understandings that are characterised as definitive and unimpeachable and that are for a moment passionately presented and defended ... will be revised and displaced by a new truth, advocated just as ardently' (Samoff 1992:61). By definition, the desire for constant novelty implies the obsolescence of today's development fads in the near future.

For the purposes of this article, social development experts, who were discussed earlier, most resemble the two tailors. The courtiers might be taken to represent the charmed inner circles of professionalised development practitioners, including those in North and South. The courtiers are adept at using the language of the donors, and are likely to act as privileged interpreters of what the new policies mean in practice (Craig and Porter 1997:52). Social development experts also resemble the two tailors, however, since they have managed to set themselves up in business and obtain substantial profits without ever having to prove any concrete results.

The Emperor stands for the whole business of development, which sinks or swims according to its ability to persuade others that it is still in control. The state of nakedness is akin to the impotence of the development business before the huge task it has set itself. It cannot hope to eliminate, or even marginally alleviate, the poverty of three-quarters of humanity, while simultaneously supporting economic policies which increase impoverishment worldwide. The crowd of onlookers at the procession are the poor who stare at the image of the Emperor, and wonder why no one has told him of his embarrassing state of nudity.

Before the two clever tailors arrived, local tailors had of course been dressing the Emperor tolerably well. The garments they produce still cover the bodies of the poor, though they are ragged. Like many volunteer and low-paid grassroots development workers and government officials in the South, the local tailors are displaced by the new policies emanating from on high. Many have been working in community development and basic service provision for decades. The context of state withdrawal and the formalising and 'scaling up' of NGO activities is not favourable to these development workers, and many now find themselves excluded from the sophisticated development networks emerging in response to shifting donor demands. Local tailors know, however, that their society will have to devise new ways of clothing, housing, and feeding the population in the future, since the visiting experts and the Emperor certainly cannot do so.

Imagine the Emperor's procession as some major initiative, perhaps an anti-poverty strategy supported by the World Bank. It may be launched with much fanfare, and local CBOs and NGOs may be invited to take part in the procession, in other words to reorient their work towards the priorities of the new programme. Grassroots organisations have been invited to take part in the privatisation of service delivery and to substitute for the state as part of structural adjustment programmes. Since they are being clothed by the Emperor, these agencies lose the desire to shout out that he is naked.

Before the procession, most poor people may still hope that the new policies will transform a series of past failures into a better future for themselves and their children. The more the attractions of the new, improved brands of development intervention are vaunted at international conferences and colloquia, and in the national media, long before the procession starts, the greater will be the sense of public disappointment when the Emperor is finally exposed.

There is nothing new about strangers coming to town and tricking locals, and there is little new about the new development orthodoxy. One reviewer recently described the launching of the UK Labour government's 1998 White Paper on Development as akin to '[d]ressing a wolf in sheep's clothing in the Emperor's New Clothes'. The same reviewer found little

substance to the claim that the policies being introduced were both innovative and likely to improve aid delivery.⁵ In *The Emperor's New Clothes*, it is a young, illiterate boy who shouts out the truth:

'But he doesn't have anything on!' cried a little child. 'Listen to the innocent one,' said the proud father. And the people whispered among each other and repeated what the child had said. 'He doesn't have anything on. There's a child who says that he has nothing on.' *'He has nothing on!'* shouted all the people at last. (Andersen 1995:7)

What kept the adults silent so long? In the courtiers' case it was mainly the fear of being thought too stupid to see the cloth, or of being thought unfit for office, and dismissed. Those who are stupid, or not fit for office, will not expect to see the cloth, but will not reveal that to anyone. Those who are neither stupid nor dishonest will not reveal that they cannot see the cloth for fear of being hounded out of office for appearing stupid and unsuited to their posts.

All the councillors, ministers and men of great importance who had come with [the emperor] ... stared and stared; but they saw no more than the emperor had seen, and they said the same thing that he had said, 'It is lovely.' *And they advised him to have clothes cut and sewn, so that he could wear them in the procession at the next great celebration.* (Andersen 1995:5)

Officials, development experts, consultants, project workers, and all those whose interests are tied up in the tangled web of development work, have to sing the praises of the invisible, or they find themselves sidelined and maybe unemployed. They must exclaim how marvellous something is when they do not see it at all, and must attribute much that is positive to the (generally minuscule) interventions of the donors. Eventually, however, their flattery fails to convince, and even they are forced to agree that the new policies have had few concrete achievements. Like the Emperor's clothes, these policies have cost a great deal of time, money, and effort in their fabrication.

One hopeful outcome of this tale may be that tried and tested procedures, however threadbare and worn, may be a better basis for re-designing policy than promises that cannot be verified in advance. The local social development experts, for example, may demand protection from the unfair competition of outside experts. They may be considered more reliable since they cannot offer solutions and then run off when the outcome is judged a failure. How such demands for better treatment can be reconciled with donors' apparent determination to include a sizeable technical assistance component in development funding remains an open question. Donors may not wish to reduce this component of the aid budget, since that will undermine the position of the development profession in the North. The discussion in the following section is intended to briefly illustrate what has been said so far in relation to the case of democratisation in Africa.

Democratisation in Africa

As was the case during the colonial era, the introduction of notions of good government, now renamed good governance, is part and parcel of a process of unilateral disengagement by dominant powers. Since the 1980s, African intellectuals have been hotly debating the meaning and content of democracy, civil society, human rights, and citizenship in the African context. Such desirable-sounding notions are now incorporated into new forms of political conditionality to which African governments and development organisations are subject.

New forms of social and political organisation have emerged in many African countries, usually in response to the hardships caused by economic crisis, drought, state collapse, and civil unrest. Some studies have called for the 'second liberation of Africa', drawing some explicit parallels between anti-apartheid and independence struggles and struggles against internal neo-colonialism in post-independence African states. Most Africanists in the West, however, display a puzzling silence concerning the relevance of the South African case for democratisation in other African states.⁶

The *1995 World Development Report* demonstrated that international inequalities between countries have been widening annually since the early 1980s.⁷ In this context, demands for democratisation can not be confined to the sphere of civil and political rights. A much wider range of demands, including redistributive policies to ensure a minimum level of economic and social rights, is also on the agenda, particularly for workers and the peasantry (Ake 1995). However, it is hard to see how wider agendas of democratisation can be reconciled with structural adjustment policies currently being implemented in most of the African continent.

Under SAPs, the restructuring of the domestic economy is disconnected from international or national redistribution of resources. The result is that the poor are made to bear the burden of restructuring. There is merit here in considering the arguments of the restitution debate. Even the more radical changes that can be implemented within African states and societies, such as land reform, local government, and reform of rural structures, may not be enough (see Mamdani 1996).

The work of some development lawyers suggests that the global dimension of democratisation may be crucial to the wider definition of democratisation being adopted in practice. According to some, the history of colonialism still 'places some responsibility on [Northern states] to compensate those nations who have been the victims' of past economic exploitation (Gosling 1991:66). Global conditions have deteriorated since independence for most African countries, and their position in relation to the industrialised North increasingly resembles that of the 'bantustans' in the old South Africa. This deprives people of access to resources. As one author imaginatively suggests, individuals should logically be compensated for lost earnings resulting from exclusionary policies imposed by the North on the South. This could apply in the field of immigration legislation, for example (Goodin 1992:8-9). While this is highly unlikely, Goodin does make an interesting point, which has some implications for a broad definition of democratisation in Africa.

Without socio-economic improvements and international redistribution, no amount of democratisation will be able to improve material living conditions for most Africans. The South African case reminds us of the importance of both political and socio-economic transformation to any meaningful form of democratisation. Democratisation without development and redistribution will be an illusion, like the Emperor's new clothes, resulting in what Ake calls 'hollow shell' democracies (Ake 1995).

After the catastrophic experience of Rwanda, no one can be unaware of the potential costs of pushing through political reforms to bring about multi-party elections. Attention must also be paid to resolving socio-economic crises in the African continent, including the failed development policies of the past. The new democratic clothes in which African states have been dressed are all too often not only insubstantial, but also very costly in financial and human terms. Organising multi-party elections, creating political parties, and reforming the constitution can all be cripplingly expensive during a period of structural adjustment and state cutbacks. In the rush to roll back the state, and to privatise all public assets and services, it is all too often overlooked that 'the guarantor of the autonomy of civil society can be none other than the state' (Mamdani 1996:15).

Without an autonomous civil society and without some real involvement by the mass of citizens in determining the form to be taken by development 'elections will simply be a choice between oppressors' (Ake 1995:86). There will be no visible improvement in the state's accountability to its populace after the elections and no visible improvement in the country's economic situation. Economic and political conditions may even deteriorate, and this can prove disastrous.

Conclusion

The parable of the Emperor's new clothes hints at the possibility that the current spate of fashions in the development business may be little more than sound and fury. Wherever there are successes, they tend to be attributed to the wisdom of donors' policies. Failures, on the other hand, are usually attributed to reality on the ground being not up to the task of social development. As development conditionalities become more intangible, this reversal of responsibility becomes easier to engineer; the poor are increasingly being blamed for their own poverty. And as with Hans Christian Andersen's fable, revealing the Emperor as naked will not be the end of the story.

At last, when the Emperor realises that his own rather large, uncovered belly is sticking out in front of him, the truth becomes undeniable. Even so, he chooses once more to ignore it, and feels obliged to keep going, just for the sake of appearances.

The emperor shivered, for he was certain that they were right; [i.e. that he had no clothes on] but thought. 'I must bear it until the procession is over.' And he walked even more proudly, and the two gentlemen of the imperial bedchamber went on carrying the train that wasn't there. (ibid.)

Might there also be some other reason why Southern partners often pretend to see what donors claim should be visible? Some local development professionals, and some of those who have already seen how development ideology and practice operate, might now be rather enjoying the sight of the Emperor, naked and ridiculous, and not yet aware of how preposterous he looks. In the procession, the crowds shout 'How beautiful!', and so prolong the illusion that the Emperor is fully clothed.

The reluctance of social development advisers to criticise donor agencies too openly will mean that many policy failures will only become visible after the end of the project. Men and women may have been set at war, sustainable practices in farming may have been destroyed, and equipment may have been left to rust. It is in the interest of no-one, except perhaps the local tailors, to report failures. If a project fails then there is normally no further financial support. Western donors thus receive the inflated compliments of project managers and development workers as a distant, distorted echo of their own hopes and dreams, and are happy (see cartoon in Figure 1).

This article has not sought to provide any solutions to the problems of unaccountable power in the development business. Perhaps the best one can do is to suggest that aid policies should be based on a commitment to understanding the structural causes of oppression and poverty. This would counter a growing belief that poor people can somehow solve (and thereby become responsible for) their own poverty and powerlessness, with minimal support from outside. That even the poorest and most disadvantaged person has some room for manoeuvre should not lead to ignoring the often overwhelming oppression exerted by social structures.

Solidarity with those who struggle against the structural causes of poverty should be the main priority of officials and policies of Northern (and Southern) development agencies.

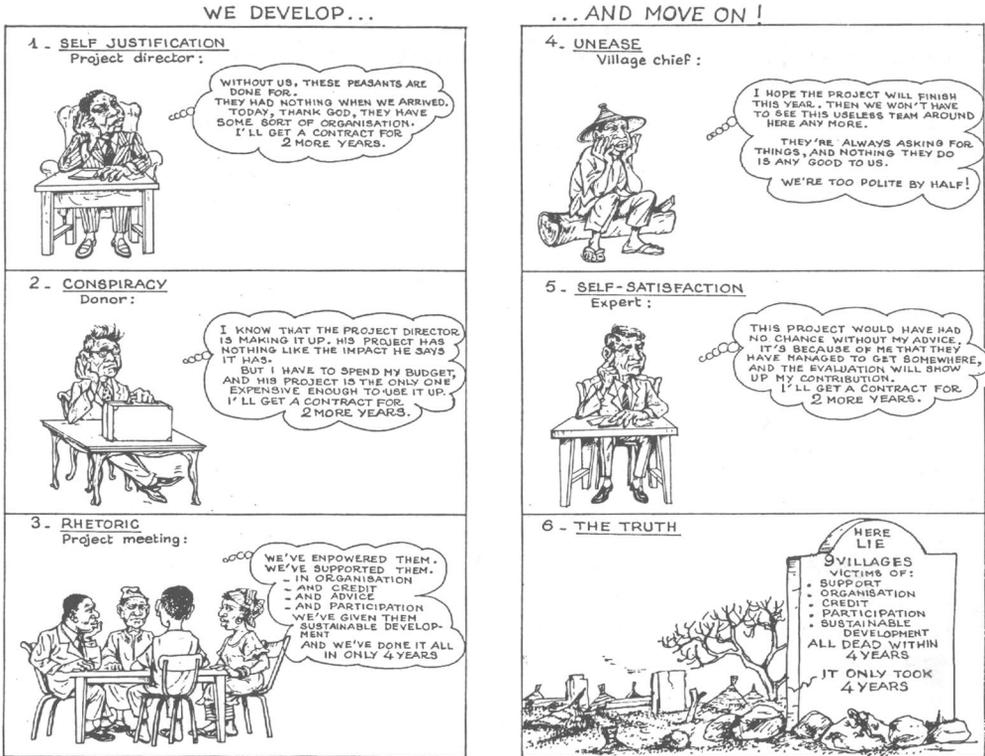


Figure 1: Reprinted courtesy of *Baobab* (published by Arid Lands Information Network), Dakar, Senegal.

However, such solidarity sits uneasily with large per diems, international club class travel, and five-star hotel accommodation. These seductive luxuries have the effect of distancing even the best-intentioned social development professionals, from understanding and combating the causes of under-development and immiseration.⁸

In conclusion, the story of the Emperor's new clothes may be useful if it helps us to reflect on how insubstantial offers of external assistance may kill off local development initiatives. In the past decade, throughout the Third World, pre-existing survival strategies and locally generated initiatives for socio-economic and political change have been diverted and nipped in the bud by the imposition of ever more complex and intrusive forms of socio-political conditionality. Real improvements are needed in people's daily lives as they struggle to cope with the fallout of economic restructuring. People are also increasingly demanding respect for their civil and legal rights, and are unwilling to accept arbitrary and despotic regimes. All these demands can be undermined in the rush to meet the new socio-political criteria of the donor agencies, as transmitted by social development experts, for example. However, these experts may still be oblivious to the consequences of what they are doing. So forgive them!

Notes

- 1 See Gilbert Rist (1997) *The History of Development From Western Origins to Global Faith*, London: Zed Books, especially pp. 21–24.

- 2 For a scathing indictment of neo-liberal policies, see Michel Chossudovsky (1997) *The Globalisation of Poverty: Impacts of IMF and World Bank Reforms*, London: Zed Books and Third World Network. Evidence of growing income disparities within and between countries is given also in the World Bank's (1995) *World Development Report: Workers in an Integrating World*, Oxford: OUP.
- 3 I am grateful to Deborah Eade, Editor of *Development in Practice*, for reminding me that participation and empowerment have not always been tame references—far from it. Commenting on an earlier version of this paper, she pointed out that in Latin America and elsewhere, development activists have lost their lives and committed years to the fight for people's basic rights.
- 4 On the important idea of autonomous development, see Raff Carmen (1996) *Autonomous Development: Humanizing the Landscape*, London: Zed Press.
- 5 See Howard White (1998) 'British aid and the White Paper on International Development: dressing a wolf in sheep's clothing in the Emperor's New Clothes?', *Journal of International Development*, 10:151–166. Early efforts to promote good governance, participation and community self-help date from the late colonial period, when the aim (as now) was mainly to cover the cost of welfare and health services through 'voluntary' contributions. See M. Cowen and R. Shenton, 'The invention of development', in Jonathon Crush (ed.) (1995) *The Power of Development*, London: Routledge.
- 6 For example, South Africa is not even mentioned in John Wiseman (ed.) (1995) *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London: Routledge. For studies which do consider the South African case see Adebayo Adedeji (ed.) (1996) *South Africa and Africa: Within or Apart?*, London and Cape Town: Zed Books/SADRI Books; Peter Nzongola-Ntalaja (1989) 'The African crisis: the way out', *African Studies Review* 32(1); and Mamdani (1996) and Ake (1995).
- 7 See the World Bank Report referred to in Note 2 above, especially pp. 162–168 on widening of income inequalities during the 1980s, both within and between countries.
- 8 An amusing and honest account of problems of the jet-set lifestyle in the development business is Leonard Frank (1986) *The Development Game*, London: Granta, pp. 231–243.

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The author

Helen Hintjens lectures at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Wales and is Senior Visiting Fellow at the Department of Politics, University of Melbourne. She has published several articles and books on post-colonial relations and development problems in the Caribbean, Rwanda, and francophone West Africa. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Development Ethics Panel, Development Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Bradford, 9–11 September 1998. Contact details: Centre for Development Studies, School of Social Sciences and International Development, University of Wales Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK. E-mail: <h.hintjens@swansea.ac.uk>.