



The World Today

Power Imbalances and Development Knowledge

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The primary aim of this article is to discuss the reform of the international development architecture within an analytical framework of power imbalances. First of all, power is defined as “the ability of human agency to exercise control over its social and physical environment” and power imbalances as “asymmetrical relations of power among persons, institutions or states”. Power imbalances in North-South relations reside in the military and economic spheres and in that of knowledge. Military power imbalances are significant but are outside the scope of this article. Economic power imbalances are embedded in the operation of global markets and in the ownership and governance of international institutions.

We summarize Southern proposals for reform of international institutions to introduce greater representativeness, transparency and accountability; but argue that imbalances in international trade, finance, and technology flows would limit the impact of such reform. For instance the net South-North resource flows, the impact of Northern agricultural subsidies and of the long-term decline in the terms of trade for primary commodities. Hence, there is a sense in which the international development architecture is marginal to international development.

Furthermore, the concept of *knowledge hierarchies* depicts and analyzes North-South imbalances in development knowledge. The hierarchy is conceptualized both as a set of epistemic/ideological systems, with “international” (Northern) knowledge at the top and “local” (Southern) knowledge at the bottom; and as an institutional hierarchy of knowledge centres with Northern centres in the dominant positions. Epistemically international knowledge in the form of the neo-liberal paradigm claims universal applicability; as such, it plays an ideological role.

The dominance of Northern centres derives from their huge resources, their role as international centres of intellectual innovation, their close relationship with funding agencies and from the intellectual socialization of Southern decision-makers. However, the more advanced countries of the South have created important knowledge centres of their own and this opens opportunities for South-South collaboration in training, joint research, and staff exchange. Relative power in the system also shifts over time. The

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First published [The Sunday Guardian](#), December 30th 2007

[The World Today](#) is a weekly column of The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations

leverage of the South during the era of post-Second World War developmentalism diminished steeply during the era of neo-liberal globalization; but this is itself changing due to a legitimacy and credibility crisis now affecting neo-liberal globalization and the Bretton Woods institutions.

In the argument for a context-specific and locally driven approach to development, with the knowledge empowerment of the South as a crucial element. The epistemic dimension proposes that economic processes are embedded in a specific historical, socio-cultural and institutional setting and that appropriate policies are specific in time and place. Policies must be locally engineered and rely primarily on local initiative. The institutional dimension privileges the role of local centres in generating knowledge, in making it widely accessible, and in evaluation and social learning. Hence, existing knowledge hierarchies must be overturned.

From this follows the implications for the reform of the international development architecture. Development cooperation should recognize diversity, accept policy heterodoxy; and support Southern/local capabilities in development knowledge. Multilateral and bilateral organizations should provide complementary resources and collaboration to Southern centres. Regional centres can play an important role. Reform of the system of global economic governance is integral; reaffirming the centrality of a United Nation system in international development; equipping UN agencies as sources of intellectual innovation and pluralism; re-assigning the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the regional commissions the roles of think tanks; developing linkages with Southern centres; re-positioning the global role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with a focus on the provision of global public goods that support development and international economic stability; providing other needed changes in the international financial architecture; reforming World Trade Organization (WTO) decision-making; and, more generally, addressing the rules and arrangements governing international trade, finance, investment and technology.

This is the abridged version of a lecture given by Prof. Norman Girvan on Thursday November 8th 2007 at the Institute of International Relations.