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Studia Redemptorystowskie nr 13, 511-522

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2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE *CONTRA* ECONOMISM AND THE IMPERATIVE OF CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE OF AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>**

**Słowa kluczowe:** rozwój, kultura, wiedza lokalna, wartości, ekonomia

**Keywords:** development, culture, indigenous knowledge, values,  
economism

**Schlüsselwörter:** Entwicklung, Kultur, einheimische Wissen, Werte,  
Wirtschaftswissenschaft

### **Introduction**

While former theories – modernisation and dependency – have clearly differed over the means of attaining the object and essence of development, there has been little discussion of development content or its appeal. To these theories, the essence of development is seen in the process of qualitative change, that is, a process that is linear, revolutionary and diffusionary particularly from Western Europe and North America to societies in the Global South. This means that Western Europe and North America are symbols of civilisation and modernisation and that for any society to develop, such must necessarily have certain characteristics like universalism, mobility and open diffusion. To these theorists, the ways of conceiving and representing development that are closely bound to the North's development agencies and programmes reveal more about the self-affirming ideologies of the North than insights into the peoples of the rest of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Being a paper presented at the *International Conference on Sustainable Development in Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* organised by The Postgraduate School, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria, from Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> – Saturday, 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2015.

Dependency theory provided an alternative explanation of the development process by directly challenging the sacred tenets of modernisation theory. Their basic argument is that the development of the Global North is predicated on the active under-development of the Global South. Rather than see the newly-created independent nation-states as similar entities at different stages of development as suggested by modernisation theorists, dependency theorists argued that poor and wealthy countries are parts of the same global capitalist system, a system in which the relationship between the “centre” and “peripheral” countries was historical, hierarchical, and enduring. Whereas modernisation theorists maintained that the North would guide the development of Global South through aids and investment. It argued that the actions of and ties to the North actually hindered the emergence from poverty of the South.

The discussion here, concerning the problematisation of Western economic paradigms for development shall be examined not from modernisation and dependency theories. Rather, it will examine neoliberalism approach to represent the Western hegemonic structures on other societies and nations of the world, which must be seen and felt to be following the dictates of the Western imperialists, that is, in the thoughts of market-forces.

### **Problematising Western economic paradigms**

Neoliberalism is an ideology based on the primacy of individualism, market liberalisation, entrepreneurship and state contraction. A central assumption of neoliberalism is that open, competitive, unregulated markets represent the optimal mechanism for economic development. Prominent from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, neoliberal ideas represented a major assault on the national development attitudes and approaches and a form of disdain for the state's role in the development process through such strategies as import-substitution industrialisation and price controls. Neoliberalism has a long gestation period and has been actively promoted by key and well-placed actors especially the World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund and World Bank (The Bretton Woods in Washington).

David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* opines that neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such prac-

tices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit.<sup>2</sup> Dag Thorsen's understanding of Harvey's is that neoliberalism is tightly knit to his overall analysis, which includes the firmly held belief that the world has experienced "an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970's". Harvey proposes with his definition to view neoliberalism, not as the renewal of liberalism in general, but as a distinctive economic theory. It is also apparent that Harvey sees neoliberalism not as a continuation of liberalism, but as something which lives independently of more traditional liberal values and policies.<sup>3</sup>

Harvey moves the discourse from basically political, modern and classical understanding to the debates on economic paradigm, which has set the pattern of development on economic parlance. He states thus:

Deregulation, privatisation, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common. Almost all states, from those newly minted after the collapse of the Soviet Union to old-style social democracies and welfare states such as New Zealand and Sweden, have embraced, sometimes voluntarily and in other instances in response to coercive pressures, some version of neoliberal theory and adjusted at least some policies and practices accordingly... Furthermore, the advocates of the neoliberal way now occupy positions of considerable influence in education (the universities and many 'think tanks'), in the media, in corporate boardrooms and financial institutions, in key state institutions (treasury departments, the central banks), and also in those international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) that regulate global finance and trade. Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, UK, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> D. Thorsen, *The Politics of Freedom: A Study of the Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, and of the Challenge of Neoliberalism* (A Ph.D thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Finland, 2012), p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 3.

The major intent of this theory is purely free market forces based on economic freedom as discussed by Jeffrey Sachs' and Joseph Stiglitz' market forces theory as development. The analyses of Stiglitz and Sachs from market forces are in the realm of economic development, which is built on capitalist ideology.

The analyses of Joseph Stiglitz and Jeffrey Sachs from market forces are in the realm of economic development, which is built on capitalist ideology. Economic form of development is based on self-interest motive in the framework of competitive markets. In such a situation, there is hardly any government interference. The private sector, which takes part in the process of development, is mainly guided by the principle of profit maximisation. Economic progress largely depends on labour productivity and capital endowment. The labour productivity becomes a function of many types of material incentives, which are given by the private sector. This type of development model was formulated by theorists like Ricardo and Adam Smith.

Joseph Stiglitz and Andrew Charlton see development from market forces and how trade could promote development. In *Fair Trade for All*, the duo aver that trade liberalisation is, in general, welfare-enhancing; stating that the problems of poverty, inequality, incomplete risk and capital markets cause the experience of liberalisation to vary across societies depending on individual characteristics.<sup>5</sup> While they opine on trade towards achieving development especially among the developing societies, they equally theorise on market forces, which will lead to emancipatory development. It is on these market forces that Stiglitz says, are shaped by political processes. According to him, markets are shaped by laws, regulations and institutions saying that:

Every law, every regulation, every institutional arrangement has distributive consequences – and the way we have been shaping America's market economy works to the advantage of those at the top and to the disadvantage of the rest. Indeed, politics, to a large extent, reflects and amplifies societal norms. In many societies, those at the bottom consist disproportionately of groups that suffer, in one way or another, from discrimination. The extent of such discrimination is a matter of societal norms.<sup>6</sup>

Stiglitz offers a viable position in the discourse of development examining the issue from inequality, stating that it is on inequality that there seems to be an endangered future, which is anchored on a divided society.

<sup>5</sup> J. Stiglitz, A. Charlton, *Fair Trade for All*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, UK, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> J. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*, New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company 2012, pp. 52–53.

Sachs' intent about development is that there is the need for a new economic paradigm, which includes global, inclusive, co-operative, environmentally aware, and science-based that will salvage the emerging realities of the world today. Sachs writes that our global society will flourish or perish according to our ability to find common ground across the world on a set of shared objectives and on the practical means to achieving them. A clash of civilisations could well result from the rising tensions, and it could truly be our last and utterly devastating clash.<sup>7</sup> In this argument, the alternative to the seemingly problematic issues is a series of threats to global well-being, all of which are solvable but potentially disastrous if left unattended. Prosperity must be maintained through new strategies for development that complement market forces, spread technologies, stabilise the global population and enable the billion poorest people to escape from the trap of extreme poverty.

In the clear examination of the projects of neoliberalism theory, the adherents postulate diverse paradigms in the process of attaining their set-objectives, which will alone benefit rich individuals and industrialised societies essentially North America and Western Europe. Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick in *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments and Alternatives* state that, "the set of "policy instruments" derived from the Washington Consensus and applied to (mainly Third World) borrowing countries by the World Bank and the IMF was said by Williamson to include *Fiscal discipline, Reducing public expenditures, Tax reform, Interest rates, Competitive exchange rates, Trade liberalization, Encouraging foreign direct investment, Privatization, Deregulation* and *Securing property rights*. In brief . . . the economic positions that Washington agreed upon in setting growth and development policies for the rest of the world could be summarized as "prudent macroeconomic policies, outward orientation, and free market capitalism."<sup>8</sup> In essence, the neoliberal approach not only lacks a mechanism to combat inequality, it promotes it. It also focuses on free trade and disregards other important development factors such as the rights of workers and the effects it has on the citizenry. The principle of non-intervention of the state reveals that this principle is one-sided as it allows for state intervention insofar as creating a suitable business environment, deregulation and privatization, which only benefits the rich and the industrialised nations without a support for the developing societies and nations. This is a clear example of the introduction of

<sup>7</sup> J. Sachs, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*, New York: The Penguin Press 2008, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> R. Peet, E. Hartwick, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments and Alternatives*, New York-London: Guilford Publications 2009, pp. 85-86.

Structural Adjustment Programmes by the Bretton Woods Institutions on developing states in the Global South.

### **The challenges of Western economic paradigms on African development narratives**

There are major gaps and problems that have been created with the introduction of neoliberalism theory into the world economics and the discussion of development. And these gaps affect societies of less-developed economies particularly African societies while the developed economies continue to be wealthier on daily basis. Harvey points out that there is the problem of how to interpret monopoly power. Competition often results in monopoly or oligopoly, as stronger firms drive out weaker.<sup>9</sup> This is the situation of big transnational or multinational companies driving out the local industries of business and in essence creates adverse effects on the economy and the survival of the citizenry due to either unemployment or under-development. This will continue as there is declining governments' power and influence due to increase power of the multinational and/ or transnational companies.

Another factor is the fact of failure in markets and trades. The fundamental problem being created by neoliberalism theory is a replica of what transpires in almost all the less-developed societies where the so-called multinationals are. There is a wide-spread shirking of responsibility due to the people as encapsulated in what is termed as "corporate social responsibility" – a meager sum due to the people. An instance of this problematique is what the Niger-Delta people of Nigeria suffer from essentially the pollution of their environment and depletion of huge human resources. Accentuating to the above, Mohammad Wahidi avers that workers lose their protection and become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. This coupled with the unequal distribution of income between the rich and the poor widens disparities even further.<sup>10</sup> In another dimension, he says the economic freedom in the form of neo-liberalism where political freedom is either weak or non-existent can only open the door for widespread abuse and exploitation of labour. Political freedom on the other hand enables workers to establish effective mechanisms to protect their rights and entitlements. Neo-liberalism takes away some of the political freedom it does not add to it. Why should political freedom be attributed to economic freedom? Why not argue the opposite, which may even look more plausible?<sup>11</sup> He also delves into

<sup>9</sup> D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> M. Wahidi, *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Neo-Liberal Approach to Development*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, UK, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the problem of technological change, which relies on a belief that every problem of man has to be treated by and with technological know-how and with diverse orientations from different organisations and groups. According to him, the neoliberal theory of technological change relies upon the coercive powers of competition to drive the search for new products, new production methods, and new organizational forms. This drive becomes so deeply embedded in entrepreneurial common sense, however, that it becomes a fetish belief that there is a technological fix for each and every problem.<sup>12</sup>

Another factor concerning the problem of this theory is raised again by Wahidi in the sense that it allows the poor to be “used” by the rich, *vis-à-vis* the less-developed economies by the industrialised ones. He writes in this realm that the neo-liberal stance on the protection of property rights is also one sided. It only seeks to protect the rights of the rich and disregards the poor by further restricting their powers to protect themselves against a powerful body of capitalists who can exploit them at will. Deregulation on the other hand inevitably leads to labour exploitation fuelled by capitalist greed.<sup>13</sup>

Based on these few critical remarks on neo-liberalism theory, one can conclude that this theory has brought more woes to the societies especially the developing ones in the quest towards economic growth and has not translated to any form of development, which is no other than human development. It is on the basis of this that Wahidi<sup>14</sup> declares that:

Neo-liberalism has failed to lead to any level of long term development. Placing the fate of the economy and workers in the hands of corporate institutions inevitably creates a situation where action is led by greed and not by passion for development. Reliance on multinational companies to regulate the market creates a volatile situation and there is no effective mechanism to either prevent economic collapse due to external shocks or stop the exit of foreign capital and investment from the country when markets started to perform poorly.

Neo-liberalism resembles an ideology more than a development approach. Ideologies emerge as very seductive and appealing concepts, but in essence they never achieve what they promise.

With these fundamental loop-holes inherent in neoliberalism theory, in order to represent other Western development theories, we now turn our attention towards the link in the discourse of development especially among societies of the Global South, which is represented here by Africa.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



## **The case for indigenous knowledge in the discourse for African development**

Our argument in this paper is that a resolution of the development challenges confronting Africa demands an incorporation of indigenous knowledge into development. By indigenous knowledge, we mean the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to maintain or improve their livelihood. It also means a body of knowledge (or bodies of knowledge) of a people of particular society or societies that they have survived on for a very long time. It is developed through the processes of acculturation and through kinship relationships that societal groups form, and handed down to posterity through cultural practices and so many times, through oral tradition. As such, it is the agent, which binds society or societies as it constitutes communicative processes through which knowledge is transmitted, preserved, and acquired by humans in their different societies. It is the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making. This means that the basic composition of any society's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. As Verhelst in his discussion of what we refer to as indigenous or cultural knowledge, opines that:

By culture is meant, therefore, every aspect of life: know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language, symbols, socio-political and economic behaviour, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

They are knowledge forms that have failed to die despite the racial and colonial onslaughts suffered at the hands of Western imperialism through slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. These knowledge forms are known by other names, and among them are cultural knowledge, localised knowledge, indigenous ways of knowing, traditional knowledge, indigenous technical knowledge, and rural knowledge among others.

This proposition enhances the interrogation of indigenous knowledge of African conception, which conspicuously differs from the economic/scientific model of the Western spirit. This struggle will affirm that there is a viable alternative to the Western notion, which is based on market forces, science and technology. This means that the search for a better approach to development should move from a predominantly economic/scientific understanding

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<sup>15</sup> T. Verhelst, *No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development*, London–New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd 1990, p. 17.

towards a more humane concern, which recognises man as its principal subject and supreme objective. The argument is that if the 'conditions' for development are changed from economic/scientific model to the culture-based model; there will be substantial insights into the discourse and praxis of development especially in Africa. It is on this understanding, that is, an interest in localised and indigenous ideology that values and virtues of a people among others are based upon that enduring development could be actualised. This approach to development will be a recognition not only of the moral values, integrity and dignity that each human being has, but that it will be based on the utmost need to address the basic human needs for sustenance of life as man is both ends and means of development.

The sustainability of this approach is that any form of conception about development must be based on the specificity of the society seeking to be developed, if there is any quest for relevance and recognition. It then becomes clear that any form of conception, theory and or strategy of development must ultimately be derived from the needs, aspirations, values and ideals expressed by the people's understanding<sup>16</sup> of what they intend to become both in the moment and in the future. And in accordance with this principle, Adjei avers that it becomes clear to us that Africans ought to be both objects and subjects of their quest for development. Consequently, other entities engaged in this quest become agents, at best. This means that the structure and content of a development paradigm for Africa would have to reflect the wills and aspirations of Africans. To ensure this, Africans need to participate in forging these paradigms and their implementation.<sup>17</sup> In this approach, therefore, Oladipo avers that, "development process is not an abstraction, the integrity of which can be measured simply in quantitative terms, . . . Rather, it is a process of social transformation, which involves the replacement of those factors that inhibit the capacity of the individual for self-direction and the promotion of social cooperation with those which promote these ideals. In short, it is a process whose essence concerns the quality of life (including the quality of social relations of the people."<sup>18</sup>

It will be futile exercises when societies and nations of the Global South think of development from the economic structures as outlined by the Western paradigms. This, if not properly checked, will continue to aggravate the appalling social conditions in which people and societies have found them-

<sup>16</sup> M. Adjei, *Africa's Development: The Imperatives of Indigenous Knowledge and Values*, University of South Africa: an unpublished Ph.D thesis, 2007, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> O. Oladipo, *Philosophy and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, Ibadan: Hope Publications 2009, pp. 96–97.

selves. Here, Verhelst opines that, "All the models . . . have been based on Western pre-conceptions. The indigenous cultures of the peoples of the Third World have been largely neglected."<sup>19</sup> Then, in our rat-race for development in Africa, the need to recognise the quality of the enduring nature of indigenous knowledge arises and it is the main approach on how we can achieve holistic development in Africa.

And without taking cognizance of the significance of indigenous knowledge, Africans will continue to live within the ambit and cultural factors of the imperialists. Hence, using the Western models and approaches to development in Africa will surely lead to catastrophe as Verhelst reiterates the significance of indigenous knowledge that, "Without this, we will be unable to appreciate the extent to which they succeed in putting up a fearful resistance to development projects conceived in the West, a resistance which often explains the mishaps that befell such projects. Indigenous cultures are more than just obstacles to development that tries to impose cultural alienation. They are also economic, social and political sources of life. As such they can be matrixes of endogenous development in every aspect of life."<sup>20</sup> This means that there will be vitality when Africans are able to re-discover the contents and themes of development in indigenous knowledge. This portrays that there is urgent need for Africans to get back to their roots in the quest and struggle for development.

## Conclusion

Our argument in this piece has been to argue that there is the utmost need to recognise the fundamental roles that indigenous knowledge plays in the quest for development of any human society. And in order to arrive at this point, we have been able to examine Western model, using neoliberalism theory, to argue for the continuous under-development of societies below the Mediterranean. This is due to the fact that models and theories concerning development such as modernisation, dependency and neoliberalism theories have failed in their bids to liberate societies of the Global South. And on the other hand of the debate, these theories and models continue to maintain the strangle-hold of the Westerners on peoples and societies of the Third World. This, we have shown, with the challenges and negative effects these theories have on development narratives of the Global South societies as their indigenous cultural traits and themes have been neglected. Hence, genuine and sus-

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<sup>19</sup> T. Verhelst, *No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

tainable development could only be a reality, when such anomaly is removed and Africans themselves recognise the impacts of indigenous knowledge to development.

### Summary

The discourse of development has been one of the pre-occupations of scholars for a long time now. This is so, because these scholars felt the urge to fashion out an appropriate model or paradigm for development. The search for a model that could best characterise development has prompted them to canvass and/or put forward one paradigm or another. One approach, which seems popular but by no means the only one and which derives from the insights of the classical economists like Adam Smith, tend to see development in terms of measurable economic indexes especially wealth creation founded on a competitive market forces. This is shown by the identification of development with the capacity of the national economy to generate an annual increase of its gross national product (GNP) by at least five or seven percent. Again, this is foisted on the optimism by some Euro-American scholars on the supremacy of Western epistemology and values". Thus development construed as economic developments, or economic growth, that is economism, it becomes the sole business of economists, technologists, engineers, environmentalists, geologists, physicists, geographers, among others to the exclusion of such intellectual pursuits like philosophy and other humanities based disciplines. Perhaps, the contribution of the latter is minimal. But quite on the contrary, the understanding of development in terms of economism is grossly inadequate, given the "complex nature of the human society and culture". In the essay, we argue that the success story of Africa's development lies in constructing and evolving "indigenous African knowledge and values".

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