

Why is development work so straight ?

Queering Development

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Discussion paper

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I attempt to show that the development paradigm used to frame social and economic public interventions delivers a modernist conception of the family, the economy, and the private – public divide that is at odds both with fundamental social dynamics, and with the ethic of liberation it claims. Policies and interventions conceive of society as a structure of interlocked institutions and rules, thus cornering individuals within policed essences, meaning and functions. I develop the point that despite these normative assumptions, development practice opens spaces of identities, such as sexualities, where individuals articulate difference, dissidence, rights, and reshape dominant moralities and conception of society with regards to diversity and integration. My experience as agriculture and environment specialist for the Zimbabwean Government is then used to illustrate this analysis.

1 – Development : constructing the individual within institutions

Why do we work in the development sector ? How do we justify this involvement ? We stress the unbearable poverty and suffering of billions of individuals, the unacceptable cornering of all wealth by the happy few, the flouting of justice and rights, the selfishness of the powerful, the oppression of the majority, of women, of children, the ravages of curable diseases, the plundering of nature. To address these horrors of our times, we claim value systems and legitimate better futures, and draw paths to reach them. As our daily work gets saturated with the technicalities of defining and following these paths, the values we use become more implicit. I make the general statement that our approaches of development are based on conceiving the individual as element of institutions, thus only giving a person rights, motivation, and agency within the limits of an imagined functional identity inside the institutions we target. Development practice becomes this two tiered narration, where an institution is targeted as vehicle of change (the equalitarian family, the dynamic informal sector, the environmentally concerned village assembly, etc.) and succeeds as such because individuals perform the corresponding expected functional identities (the economically independent and educated woman with new rights, the initially poor entrepreneurial borrower-investor-producer-salesperson, the farmer who protects the nearby forest because he believes his children will need its resources, etc.). Because it claims to reach better futures through the construction or reform of specific institutions, development theory and practice fantasises *ad hoc*, corresponding, perfectly functional identities and directs its effort on making them exist.

This is quite obvious when looking at how development programmes are evaluated. Achieving an institution's development purpose is narrated as the result of individuals performing functional identities within the objectives of the institutions, and is linked to

showing that it's in their interest, that it's what they aspire to, ultimately because that's really who they are. Development becomes the story of freeing a fantasised potential identity within the underdeveloped individual. The practice of development is embodied in narratives of individuals improving their functionality within the institutions development programmes proposes as paths to reach a better future. Despite its claims and constant appeal on the collective, our practice and theory of development actually relies as strongly on assumptions on the individual, and consequently on an outline and content of its identity.

As we write a development programme or facilitate a workshop, we constantly imagine, map, define, shape, encode and instrumentalise the private realm of identities of the persons we work with. I see two problematic consequences, of which I will only discuss at length the second. Individual, identity, self-realisation : all are concepts culturally embedded in western dominated globalised culture. Individuals engaging in development work necessarily position themselves vis à vis these concepts, which is problematic in typically poly-cultural professional communities, where the position of the private-public divide is highly different from one individual to the other, as well as values and contours of the private realm.

More importantly here when considering the consequences of the creation-invasion of identities by development practice, is to what extent it is normative and leads to exclusion. My impression is that the institutionally functional private realm imagined by the development sector at large is dominated by what I call modernist and liberal identities centred on the consolidation of the family and on economic self-interest. To be more precise, this value system stresses primary economic, reproductive, and social commitment to the family, individual economic agency and search of optimal benefit, civic responsibility locally and globally through democracy, and belief and commitment to a modern future achieved by science, organisation, and work. Does this perspective reinforce certain identities, while obscuring some others ? Why and how ? I make the simple point that identity dimensions whose functionalities cannot be imagined within the body of development theory and practice are excluded, sometimes passively as non-possible and non relevant, but often actively as non-functional, less functional, or anti-functional. As an illustration, my impression is that the important challenges made to gender inequity and rights of women have not directly addressed the imagining and policing of identities within the reproductive family by the State and the patriarchy. Development work only delivers safe benign packages of income generation and improved rights for women within the family institution, while the truly liberating revolution of redefining identities outside reproduction and the family remains mostly untouched by development programmes. A second illustration - and the main point of this paper - is that as much as bourgeois modernist conceptions of development in the West during post second World War expansion, development theory and practice impose reproductive heterosexuality both as the only functional form of sex for its policies and as the ruling norm subjective experiences of pleasure, desire, and identity claims have to challenge.

2 - Locating homophobia in development theory and practice

My main point here is that sexualities have never been considered identity material – and thus existed - in imagined functional identities of the development perspective because of an incapacity of development theory to imagine a functional role for sexual minorities in its structuralist and mechanistic path to a better future. This built-in homophobia is strengthened by western narratives of the poor and the underdeveloped, whose global identity does not seem to cover the possibility of varied sexual identities and subjectivities. The poor simply can't be queer, because sexual identities are seen as a rather unfortunate result of western development and are linked to being rich and privileged. The poor just reproduce. The

specific contexts in which development theory is enacted can add another layer of negative attitude to diverse sexualities, whether because of an overall homophobic society or more importantly because of the specific moralities of institutions through which development is packaged and channelled. If we include the level of internalised homophobia of the development worker, we can thus locate homophobia within development theory and practice at four levels:

- *The development narrative, its institutions and moralities:* development theory and practice imagines modernist institutions made of individuals with homogenous, functional, policed and predictable identities. Sexualities are not mentioned because their variation away from reproductive heterosexuality is not functional within the dominant development paradigm and because they remain morally questionable within development institutions. This puts development initiatives at odds with societies' fundamental dynamics linking the existence of diverse identities to challenging oppression in the private and public realm, integration of difference, and social change at large.
- *The imagined nature of the underdeveloped:* can the poor have sexual identities ? Is queerness the privilege of the rich nations of the west ? Whether projecting economic rationale, good citizenship, ecological concern, sense of democracy, indigenous culture, good old family values or just a pure oppressed state, private motives of local groups are imagined around truncated, standard, functional identities. Experience and literature shows the importance and strength of dissident identities in dynamics of social change in non-western as much as in western cultures.
- *The local context, its institutions, narratives of progress, and moralities:* the conjunction of patriarchal legacies, post-colonial moralities, and populist governments has often created scathing homophobia among Southern institutions. The repression of lesbian and gay movements and lifestyles is harsh, though these discourses have often strengthened the mobilisation of minority groups.
- *The development worker's professional identity:* internalised expectations of the professional self and the formatting of neutral personal appearance when working in pluri-cultural contexts usually re-enforces homophobia at the working place.

3 - Constructing institutions from individuals ?

While identities, these “essence¹ of the private”, are created/reinforced/instrumentalised by dominant development discourses and policed within institutions by functionality, moralities, law and science, they at the same time become contested terrain where individuals experience the self, difference, oppression, and find reasons for dissidence. Created to rule, it becomes the place of negotiation and recognition of difference, with possible paths to integration in the main stream as society and moralities are reconfigured. Direct action by sexual minority activist groups has in deed flourished in developing countries along side important social changes (Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Thailand, China, Brazil etc.). These groups have claimed the right to exist within society without prosecution and violence, sometime with some degree of success. The development sector has only recently responded

¹ Following Sartre, I believe that « existence precedes essence », and I am quite happy with the idea that there is no such thing as an essence of the individual. Several reasons can be mentioned : essences are articulated as meaning, whose social construction are traceable, and social construction cannot precede existence; the irreducible freedom of the individual and the possibility to invent her/himself everyday; the difficulty - and danger - of trying to link essence to the social making of existence.

to these claims: some human rights organisations and donor organisations have started integrating the protection of sexual minorities into their agenda and channelling resources to their representative organisations. More consistently, the Aids epidemic has – to some extent – forced a reluctant health policy sector to open the black box of sexual practices and recognise sexualities through their diverse implications for the transmission of HIV. I believe that further recognition of diverse sexual practices and identities in society will open key approaches to broader social and economic policies of development and liberation. This seems especially appropriate in dynamics of violence, oppression and inequity, always rooted in lived or imagined identities. As a few examples, we can list the following:

- Gender, violence, inequity: the greater use of challenging homophobia to open avenues of change;
- Developing the person or policing the collective: new queer perspective in an old debate ?
- Recognising diversity and cultural change: are development policies conducive to inclusive societies ?
- Minority groups as support networks: practical perspectives in urban contexts;
- Beyond HIV prevention: using sex talk to engage on broader issues of oppression within and outside of the family.

Are we using the enemies means to make our point i.e. finding a social function of sexual identities to justify our effort to consider them worth the developer's attention ? Maybe. But this is less problematic at a practical level than at theoretical one : once minorities exist, they can carve up more space as diversity is encountered and experienced.

To conclude this theoretical part, I showed two types of issues linked to the bridging of sexual identities with development theory and practice: 1/ issues around the imposition of a specific construction/framing of the individual around identities (not discussed here – See Oliver Phillips presentation) and 2/ issues around the content/shaping of identities. I assert that appealing to the diversity of sexual identities establishes the centrality of the individual slightly outside economic or reproductive institutions – both domains with strong oppressive, exploitative and policing functions in the underprivileged parts of society - and contributes to re-establishing the political nature of development as a thought and act of liberation.

The background of this discourse is my own personal experience, as an environmentalist and agronomist, foreign, professional man working for national public institutions, in urban and rural Zimbabwe, during 7 years, between 1989 and 1999. I will try to develop briefly a few illustrative moments of this experience, when professional output, personal image, active homophobia, and inter-cultural dynamics collided in explosive – at times productive – events.

- workshop at 5, police raid at 7, queer party at 8 : the magnificent overabundance of reality;
- negotiating an identity : intelligence services, the police, and my boss;
- how the bush makes you butch : safari industry and the marketing of ultimate masculinity.
