

Is knowledge always *for* development?

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Abstract

This paper is about exploring the connection between the two parts of the term knowledge for development from a reverse perspective, with an aim to show that both the concept knowledge and development have less clear-cut meaning when it comes to analyzing and understanding social change¹. The reverse perspective refers to a search process for scenarios where knowledge may not lead to a desired way of development. While deploying knowledge to transform social practices is understood in most cases as a progressive issue, we hope to shed light on the relativity of the term through introducing power in the above given concepts. Interestingly however, the relativity at the end of the day will prove participatory or inclusive knowledge and learning to be an even more important factor to pay attention in the struggle for development.

An unexplored problem

The idea that knowledge itself can contribute to development struck social scientists and policy makers as a new discovery. It has opened ground for a number of case studies and change in focus of development policies and as well as research; though not often enough in the practices of executing institutions and agencies concerned with development issues. It is interesting to see that all are eager to find evidence of the concept that knowledge through creativity, learning, or creating conducive environment for innovation enhances development, while the question whether there any limits to it exist or whether knowledge could backfire for development has been left unexplored. Such an endeavor, we should admit, deserves an investigation broader than the five-page limitation of the present paper, although for the better understanding of this widely used term “knowledge for development” or “K4D”, it is worth a few thoughts.

Knowledge for the present discussion is understood as it has been proposed for using it for development by Engel (UNU-MERIT 4th lecture slides, 2006). We will not go into the discussion of knowledge as a public good or commodity, rather using the suggested forms of knowledge: information, know-how and expertise, endogenous knowledge and knowledge lying in artifacts. Since this is more the appearance of knowledge, in the further discussions we will also take a look at its ways of originating.

¹ I chose a more philosophical path for this paper since I found a “library research” to be more appropriate for such kind of work; examining a case study without actual participation will inherently contain certain shortcomings.

Redirecting focus on the importance of *individual and social learning* has been a crucial factor in the knowledge for development concept. Learning within or across social groups, either through automated channels or as a result of facilitation has often lead to innovative practices; many examples ranging from rural development to scientific cooperation programs have shown the validity of this idea. Are there however situations where instead of having knowledge or expertise at hand, social learning can not be accomplished to facilitate development? In what situation where knowledge is not serving development shall any facilitator intervene?

Certain knowledge-based activities, as it shall be discussed later, have the nature of *creating social tensions*, either by distorting established balance in a society or by imposing the will of one actor on another without the consent of this latter. It suggests that there are utilizations of knowledge for a disputed kind of development. The issue will then refer to the question of “development, but at what costs?” and the concept of sustainable development. In the end, we would like to demonstrate that deploying knowledge will not always contribute to sustainable development or human development, and that the term itself is relative. The question is then whether it is the process that may be responsible for any failure or it is in the nature of human exploitation of knowledge?

Development

A crucial question to deal with is how to understand the term development. While there are many definitions in the bowl to choose from, we find the concept human development to be the most appropriate for the present discourse. Following the definition proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), development should entail “enlarging peoples” choices. In spite of the fact that for the sake of calculating the human development index, the organization seems to focus on three key areas, (that are: leading a long and healthy life; being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living) the given definition also recognizes a broader realm of political, economic and social opportunities. (UNDP, 2006)

A slightly different way to describe development is the definition given by Engel and Solomon (2002, p.52), understanding it as a “human-made change, directed at preserving human dignity and improving human conditions”. Both definitions focus on peoples or humans and entail dynamism, though the causes of development are much more articulate in the second one. The exposure of social activities is a clear step forward to understanding, preserving human dignity and improving conditions is however a more problematic concept. For our present case, it suggests a question that opens up a new path leading to the realms of human activities that employ knowledge *not* for the sake of improvement of conditions.

This definitions as well as UNDP’s leave an important field for discussion, and that is *the subject* – while the term “peoples” is just as broad as “humans”, even Engel and Solomon broadly argue elsewhere the existence and interaction of multiple social actors as key issue. But the problem is, that the improving of the conditions of one actor may come at a cost of deterioration of another’s. This subjectivity needs further discussion.

It is again often not clear *at which level* we talk about development. The distinction itself between micro and macro level development is confusing. Examples that show successful local development at rural communities in least developed countries (a typical micro-level case) may be successful due to learning and innovating as a result of networking between relevant actors from all levels and from various locations, in other words, local actors

together with government actors and/or including (often, though not necessarily through donors) external knowledge as well. Here development is a case of mutual learning at various levels and localities, or can also be translated as successful local development somehow contributing to the overall development of a region or a country. However, levels and locations can be crucial to consider in a failure situation.

We see however in many cases in of development countries where armed conflicts occur that the disproportionate growth of welfare of one locality vis-à-vis a neighboring one is often a source of clashes. For such *asymmetrical development* however it is unwise to hold knowledge responsible. Knowledge nevertheless may be a tool used by certain social actors to generate as well as solve such situations.

The main point of argument is that not all forms of knowledge are conducive to enlarging people's choices. The knowledge to construct and the knowledge to destruct are both part of the toolbox that lies at hand to humans. In practice however knowledge cannot be detached from its user, hence it is the way knowledge is applied any development policy maker or facilitator should take into consideration.

Knowledge and power

The capability of a social actor (group or individual) to influence other actors' behavior or, in a broader sense, to exercise control over the human environment, generally describes power. Information has always played an undoubtedly crucial role in the obtaining and exercising of power, nevertheless, other forms of knowledge are just as conducive for accumulating power. What really matters is the difference or gap in knowledge that empowers one over others. History has provided a large number of examples: from pharaohs being able to predict solar eclipses based on scientists' knowledge have regained spiritual power over uneducated peoples; the knowledge of more advanced weaponry from time to time has been a source of military power, the (sometimes insider) knowledge of best investment opportunities or market analysis methods as a source of economic power are but a few. There is then the example presented by Bruno Latour (1987, pp.215-219) about the French explorer in the eighteenth century, Lapérouse who had relied on indigenous mapmaking knowledge to create his own map of the world, an example that brightly exposes the dynamics of power. Arriving to an unknown land, before captain Lapérouse had received local bits of information, the sailors of his fleet were in the weaker position; no matter how well they are informed about the geographic and hydrographic features of other territories, they are vulnerable to cliffs and shallow waters around the coast and passageways or to the rage and dietary habits of the locals (as, sadly, it later became their fate). As soon as however they obtained this information (and successfully sent home), it became part of the navigational knowledge of the whole admiralty, enabling warships and merchants to reach the territories and establish control.

How does this all relate to development? It is closely related to the concept of enlarging of choices. While being on the powerful side goes hand in hand with obtaining opportunities and choices, social actors who experience power exercised over them, often meet a limitation of choices. This idea has been acknowledged by the practice of empowerment in development cooperation as well as by the UNDP's definition that claims empowerment and freedom as required setting for development. (UNDP, 2006)

Does thus knowledge, through the seeking for power mean a limitation to human development? Would this be a case for knowledge against development?

During the Second World War, a remote laboratory in the desert of New Mexico employed a large group of scientists, mostly from the fields of physics, chemistry or computational sciences. Their research and interaction at Los Alamos that lead to the development of the nuclear bomb itself deserves a study, this time however, for the sake of the present discussion we only focus on the result of their research. Nuclear weapons and further developments of it provide an extreme, therefore bright example of an artifact of knowledge with the capability to make humanity extinct, in a worst case utilization, the ultimate power to destruct². At the same time, while world's use of power depends to a wide extent on nuclear energy, fundamental to economic prosperity of industrialized territories. Again, a knowledge that creates power and a power that can utilize knowledge to destruct or develop.

A similar interpretation of the question power and knowledge are given by Michel Foucault (1980). Stressing the interdependence or mutual reinforcement of these two concepts, Foucault also depicts them in their dynamism and relativistic nature. This understanding, employing an analysis close to soft systems approach reinforces the argument that it should not be knowledge held responsible for lack of development but processes of employment of it.

Knowledge against development: exclusion from the making of it

The basic problem with the dichotomy knowledge for or against development lies in its rather static character. As an analogy, it shows a high level of similarity to the description of "science as a black box" by Bruno Latour (1987). In the essence it uses ready made forms of knowledge that are available for the individuals or groups seeking or exercising power. The dynamics of reality are however far more complex, "uncertainty, people at work, decisions, competitions, controversies" (ibid, p.4) are just as characteristic to development of knowledge as they are for scientific knowledge]. Instead of using the black boxes, any action based analysis of power aspects of knowledge hampering development shall take a better look at knowledge for development in the making, through the knowledge systems perspective.

Following Engel's line of argument (e.g. Engel, 1997) on innovation and learning being the major sources of development of actors through networking, we can attribute *power* with a major potential *to impede* certain actors' involvement in the learning process. This is where knowledge in the making or learning can be a cause of asymmetrical development.

The knowledge to exclude, isolate and monopolize provide dynamic tools for accumulating and maintaining power, and in the other way around, deploying knowledge to exclude, isolate certain groups or create monopolies over certain resources may be a result of power. In the dynamic point of view, the key here is that certain actors do not learn while others do. To prevent ones from doing so, may be a result of exercise of power as well as the lack of empowerment. For matters of intervention for the sake of facilitating development, these are issues that policy makers or those intervening cannot avoid dealing with. For making the demarcation of situations where power plays a key role clearer, let us define a power situation as the exercise of exclusion by an actor *in an intended way*.

Isolation, however, can very rarely characterize knowledge in the making. Even the remote and confidential Los Alamos laboratory had not only numerous ties (with government

² For an appraisal of possible damage, apart from the memento of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Robert Batcher gives a simulation-based estimation of an Indo-Pakistani Nuclear War (Batcher, 2004).

institutions and agencies, with scientist schools or family members through individual capacities of the scientists working there), but its existence, funding and the use of the outcome of its work was an interplay of social and political actors. Consequently while it is hard to deny the social interaction in the making process, exclusion will neither foster knowledge nor development. Where exclusion is created with the employment of knowledge, it will clearly be a situation that requires intervention from the side of facilitators in order to turn back the self-reinforcing mechanism of the widening of learning gaps between social actors that results in the diminishing of the choices of peoples. These may be situations similar to the transition or problem situations described by Engel et al (2001) after Habermas. The problem is however that there is learning and possibly innovative activity or a social change going on (most likely within the framework of an action situation) – a new framework or configuration is required in order to facilitate a development process in which the neglected actors are also involved.

Findings and Conclusion

In this paper we have made an attempt to argue for the relativity, multi-faceted and dynamic concept of knowledge that cannot be detached from humans neither at its development, neither at its utilization. Knowledge itself is not enough for development, social change is achieved by the interaction of actors possessing and creating knowledge – the neutral view of knowledge (e.g. shown in Barton, 2004) needs to be refined. We have found that knowledge can in certain cases be an impediment to development when it is deployed to exclude actors. The understanding of development as the broadening of choices and improvement of human conditions had several results: we need to go deeper to identifying social groups as subjects rather than the broad term humans or peoples, and thus finding that locally uneven development may be possible – and, due to its ability to create conflicts, requires special attention.

Since the case of nuclear power has been referred to, it may be interesting now to read the finding of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues of the UN (or the Palme Commission, according to its more common name). Taking a progressive view towards the end of the cold war, the suggestions of the commission based on mutual learning and common understanding included a famous sentence: “security can best be achieved with, rather than against the adversary” (Wiseman, 2005). The idea behind the common or cooperative security is easily arguable in the framework of the soft systems analysis or, leading more simply to the fostering of networking for development.

Sustainability of development may not be achieved while creating social tensions among a number of actors related to any social change. The costs of being barred from development can socially be too high.

Thus recognizing the ability of power relations (or intentional exclusions from development) to block knowledge for the broadening of choices for all, it should reinforce the struggle for inclusive or participatory facilitation of learning and innovation for development. To avoid the danger of escalating exclusion, situations in which certain groups are isolated from learning processes of others may require outside facilitation.

Knowledge, although sometimes tempting to be taken into consideration as a machine, “a black box”, that serves (and sells) numerous purposes, shows its controversies as soon as we take a closer look. The intention of this paper was not question knowledge for development, rather to pose questions against the generalizations that are from time to time overlooked in the utilization of the knowledge for development concept. Many questions still remained unanswered; one thing that it shows is that participatory activity is even more in need at the practical, “in-the-making” level.

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