From Peasant Resistance to Agri-Food System Transformation

RUERD RUBEN, LAU SCHULPEN & WILLEM ELBERS

1. Introduction

Development studies is a multidisciplinary field of study that investigates the evolution of the Global South (and its relations to the North) from political, social, economic, cultural, geographical and technological perspectives (Sumner and Tribe 2008). It started immediately after the Second World War out of previous colonial studies, influenced by the Marshall Plan idea of economic recovery. From the 1960s onwards, it integrated more social and political sciences and recognised the importance of global dependency relationships and local governance (Currie-Alder 2016). Much of development studies is inspired by direct engagement by scholars with political activists and practitioners. During the last decades, development studies evolved into a multi- and transdisciplinary field of study, involving multiple scientific disciplines and a wide diversity of methodological approaches.

Development studies became a separate scientific area shaped by contributions from committed scholars in Western universities (such as Paul Baran, Alexander Gerschenkron, Dudley Seers, Karl Polanyi, Paul Streeten, Hans Singer and others) and scholars from the South (such as W. Arthur Lewis, Arturo Escobar, Raul Prebisch, Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen). Much attention was initially devoted to analysing the causes of internal dualism and the exploitation mechanisms of 'Third World' countries in international relationships.

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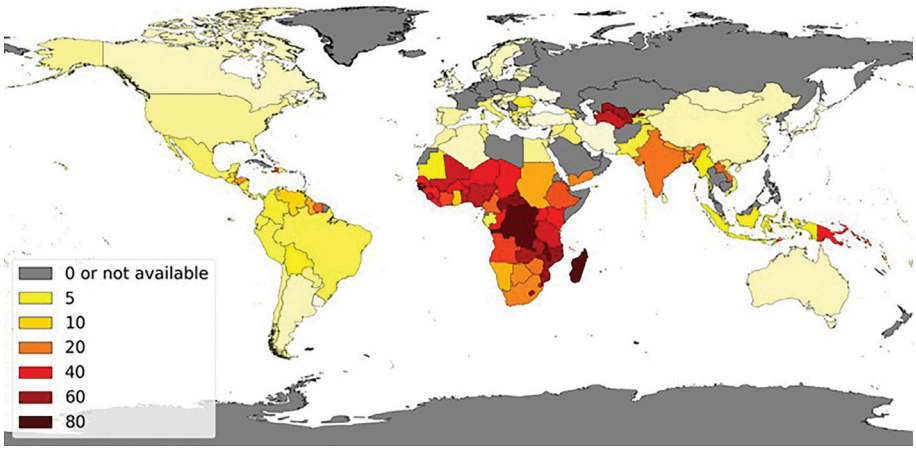

Figure 1. Population below the Poverty Line (in %).
Source: World Bank, 2018.

An essential part of research and teaching in development studies centred around rural and agricultural development issues. Major attention was given to rural poverty, inequality in land rights, the role of the peasantry, coping with natural resource shocks, intra-household bargaining and village exchange networks. Three reasons explain this dominant focus in development studies on rural and agricultural development. First, agricultural development is vital to guarantee food security for subsequent economic growth (Timmer 2002). Second, 70–80% of the people suffering from poverty still live in rural areas and depend on agricultural employment (see Figure 1). Third, agricultural growth is estimated to be two to three times as effective in reducing poverty as growth in other sectors of society and benefits mainly the poorest in society (Christiaensen and Martin 2018).

A large part of development efforts have been directed towards (peri-)urban settings, strengthening the economic structure (primarily through investments in infrastructure and diversification of production) and upgrading social service provision (especially basic education, health care and drinking water and sanitation). The share of international resources devoted to agriculture and rural development became reduced to 8–10% of total Official Development Assistance (ODA). Most African countries scarcely reach the Malabo commitment to allocate at least 10% of national public expenditure to agriculture.

While most rural development strategies are designed to promote growth and reduce rural poverty, few aim explicitly to target poor people and reduce inequality. Initially, significant attention was given to opportunities for improving crop yields and land use practices, making use of more advanced technical means for agri-

cultural production. In response to the growing commercialisation of agri-food production, large investments in roads, storage facilities and market infrastructure were made. In order to improve returns to rural labour, people increasingly engage in wage- and self-employment for non-farm activities that provide more stable income. Strategies towards further 'formalisation' to unlock the potential of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) tend to become rather oppressive, but opportunities for promoting decent work and living income conditions receive major support. In addition, collective action (cooperatives) and women's empowerment are critical components of inclusive rural development.

This contribution will briefly discuss three dominant discourses used in Nijmegen-based development studies over the last fifty years (1973–2023). We, therefore, rely on the idea of paradigm shifts (as developed by Thomas Kuhn) to assess changes in the broader conceptual framework that include basic assumptions, key concepts, and methodology for the analysis of rural and agrarian development (see Table 1 for a brief overview). We will analyse for each paradigm three structuring aspects: (a) changes in context and key challenges, (b) changes in leading questions and main problems, and (c) adjustments in methods and analytical approaches. Ultimately, we argue that the current attention to system transformation represents a welcome opportunity to simultaneously use major contributions from each paradigm to understand better the requirements for structurally reducing poverty and giving voice to rural populations.

Table 1. Successive Paradigms in Development Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen

Paradigm	Authors	Approach	Analytical methods	Driving forces	Policy strategy
Peasant resistance	Chris Kay, Bruce Mannheim, Norman Long, Gerrit Huizer.	Structural approach (*dependencia*)	Ethnography; actor-oriented; participatory action research	Collective action; leadership and alliances	Land reform; Farmer organisation; cooperatives
Rural livelihoods	Frank Ellis, Ian Scones, Robert Chambers, Leo de Haan.	Participatory approach	Life histories and comparative case studies	Access to resources; coping strategies	Community-led organisation; agroecology resilience
Agrarian institutions	Oliver Williamson, Chris Barrett, Esther Duflo, Ruerd Ruben.	Institutional approach	Robust impact analysis	Governance; bargaining; contracts	Value chain integration; Fairtrade; real pricing.

2. Peasant Resistance

From the beginning, development studies looked at change processes and supported the emancipation of poor and oppressed groups, notably peasants, women and indigenous people. 'Third World' poverty is considered to be caused by historically-created dependency relationships initiated with colonialism and perpetuated through imperialism.

Early research on the causes and effects of dependency and poverty focused on the highly unequal distribution of land (dominated by foreign-owned large-scale plantations and haciendas) and the subordinate position of the landless peasantry. The alienation of peasants from 'mother earth' (*patcha mama* in Spanish) as the origin of life is embedded in a culture of repression and distrust that can only be overcome with fundamental changes in ownership rights (Huizer 1973). Indeed, large-scale land reforms were initiated in Southeast Asia ('land to the tiller' programmes) and Latin America ('Alliance for Progress'). Peasant ownership and the creation of rural cooperatives were to enable the inclusion of the rural poor in formal legal and economic systems, increase their access to credit and information, and contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction (Kay 2019).

In this context, primary attention was given to the role of strong and charismatic leadership, the importance of establishing independent peasant organisations and the requirements of solid alliances with urban and international political constituencies. Understanding poverty as rooted in socio-economic inequality and cultural subordination implies that many areas need simultaneous changes. Change will only come 'from below' when people join forces and can break down the vicious cycles that maintain their subordinated position. This implies that development studies should focus on the political conditions for overcoming barriers to change by actively supporting local leadership and establishing broader solidarity linkages (Hoebink and Van der Velden 1999).

This viewpoint has considerable implications for the methodological approaches used in development studies. Instead of neutral observations, researchers are encouraged to engage in change processes actively. This marks the beginning of 'participatory action research' (PAR), where ordinary people become partners in the enquiry process. Their knowledge, views and capabilities are valued for analysing their situation and problems. Many participatory research processes also have an action component, which involves the participants in successive cycles of analysis, reflection and action (Gianotten and De Wit 1985). The latter approach also proved to be particularly effective in addressing sustainable natural resource management issues.

3. Rural Livelihoods

The discourse of rural livelihoods initially emerged in development research on poverty alleviation in Sub-Sahara Africa. It became increasingly clear that global development policies (embodied in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – PRSPs) did not adequately match the diverse and flexible local realities (Ellis and Freeman 2005). Consequently, the livelihood approach focussed on the wide diversity of household strategies for making a living, mixing farm and home processing activities with engagement in off-farm and non-farm work, migration and reciprocal exchange networks. Decentralisation, market transparency, institutional innovation and democratisation are key elements for improving rural service delivery and enabling pathways out of rural poverty.

The livelihood framework can be considered a response to the growing awareness of chronic and persistent poverty, especially in Sub-Sahara Africa and Southeast Asia. Enabling rural households to escape such spatial and institutional poverty traps requires an integrated approach to overcoming critical poverty thresholds. Development donors place high trust in so-called Integrated Rural Development (IRD) programmes that simultaneously address infrastructure constraints, help build local assets and support the diffusion of innovations (Jacobs 2018).

In line with the livelihood approach, priorities for rural development research shifted to issues of rural non-farm activities, informal markets and risk-coping strategies. The idea of multidimensional poverty gained ground and stimulated further research on the relationships between resource deprivation, power and network linkages (Alkire and Santos 2013). In addition, post-conflict rehabilitation strategies and displaced people's integration received increasing interest. Insights into the gender division of labour and bargaining frameworks for women's empowerment substantially improved (Kabeer 2009).

The further operationalisation of sustainable rural livelihood (SRL) analysis relies on various analytical tools and methods. Much attention is usually given to in-depth life histories and systematic comparative case studies. In addition, spatial village transects ('gestion de terroir') and the participatory reconstruction of village historical trajectories are frequently used (Pouw et al. 2016). Mixed methods with quantitative field surveys and selective qualitative case studies become highly valued to enhance external validity and support more general conclusions.

Livelihood studies thus gained a respected place in development studies but did not stay without criticism. Despite the words 'sustainable livelihoods', relatively little attention is paid to integrating resilience into development strategies.

The framework must also be 'unpacked' to operationalise other critical dimensions of power, gender, markets and the private sector. Finally, some confusion remains about the causal relationship between sustainable livelihoods and poverty elimination (Ashly and Carney 1999).

4. Agrarian Institutions

Inspired by the recognition of widespread failures of Structural Adjustment policies (growth without poverty reduction), attention shifted to the failure of markets and institutions to combat poverty and inequity. Further analysis of the structure and behaviour of agrarian institutions provided new insights into the fundamental causes of poverty. In addition to scarce asset ownership and constrained access to livelihood opportunities, poverty is increasingly recognised as rooted in dismal institutions, governance structures and capacities that hold away rights from poor people and thus lead to prohibitive transaction costs and high levels of risk and uncertainty (De Janvry and Sadoulet 2010).

In this context, strategies towards rural poverty reduction focussed on the reform of institutions, such as land registration, credit provision and market information. Primary attention is given to activities for bridging communal divides, strengthening intra-household bargaining, improving social networks and improving trust with traders (Barrett 2005). Changing these social norms, rules, and conventions is a fundamental requirement to improve interactions and support proactive behaviour that enables poor people to take advantage of these opportunities.

In practice, institutional approaches to rural development were particularly interested in strategies for providing preferential market access to poor farmers, such as fair trade, living wages and real pricing (Ruben et al. 2009). Attention is also given to strategies for linking farmers to supermarkets (e.g. contract farming, procurement arrangements) and to support local and regional mutual exchange networks (e.g. village banks, community storage). Therefore, knowledge exchange and innovation networks (using Farmer Field Schools) are promoted as devices for information sharing and contract enforcement.

Field research on the suitable institutional framework for poverty reduction became strongly evidence-based, paying due attention to robust procedures to control for endogeneity and selection bias and to identify attribution ('real' causality). Empirical surveys for large-scale data collection were combined with lab-in-the-field experiments to generate reliable information for policymakers on

the responses of poor people to incentives and the likely impact of different types of interventions (Banerjee and Duflo 2011).

Institutional approaches also meet their criticism because little explicit attention is given to analysing power dynamics. Moreover, the interactions between institutional structure and human agency remain largely unexplained. In its extreme form, (new) institutionalism has become instrumentalised in 'public choice' theory as a managerial approach for simply improving service provision. This is a classical reversal of the institutionalist view on development that puts institutional change as the starting point for change and not as an endogenous outcome.

5. Towards System Transformation

While extreme poverty has decreased substantially during the last few decades, many poor people still suffer from exclusion, and hunger and malnutrition are rising again. In the current discussion about pathways for reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is increasingly recognised that higher income and assets ownership are necessary but insufficient conditions for ending poverty. Access to social services (food, water, education and health care) and (political and psychological) empowerment are considered critical components for inclusive and sustainable development. Ending poverty and zero hunger requires a complete system transformation that goes beyond simple fixes and asks for fundamental changes in the interactions among (public, private and civic) stakeholders.

The political dimensions of such system changes become increasingly important. While the 'resistance' framework of development studies was based directly on engagement with peasant movements and base-level organizations, in the subsequent period commitments were broadened to wider groups, such as urban dwellers, indigenous people and women. The institutional approach marked the emergence of systems thinking and established a wider alignment with the public and private sector organizations.

While the character of poverty and hunger may have changed during the last fifty years, there are several components of the analysis of poverty alleviation strategies that remain valid during all periods. We can summarise three recurrent lessons from the past:

- Effective pro-poor strategies can only be identified through participatory action research that directly involves stakeholders and provides insights into their responses;

- Resource deprivation and market fragmentation lead to chronic poverty that is perpetuated into behavioural constraints of high-risk aversion and low resilience; and
- Fundamental changes in the governance of institutions are vital for poverty alleviation and provide conditions for changing power relationships and bargaining frameworks.

Notwithstanding these continuities, several emerging challenges exist for adequately linking development studies to poverty alleviation strategies. The current interest in system transformation processes provides a new rationale for better understanding the interactions between resistance, livelihoods and institutions (see Figure 2). While popular resistance creates bottom-up pressure for the democratisation of markets and institutions, institutional reforms offer top-down opportunities for improving governance and strengthening livelihoods. In addition, more resilient livelihoods enable engagements in social organisations and collective action that create broader political pressure towards institutional change.

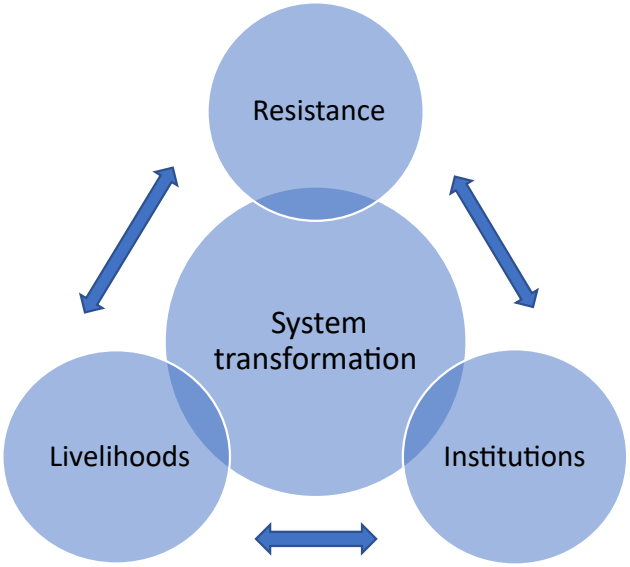

Figure 2. Interactions between Development Studies Approaches.

In addition to the stronger interaction between different analytical approaches for development studies, it is essential to reinforce their methodological complementarities and strengthen their societal impact. The role of scientific analysis is shifting

from 'understanding change' to 'reaching impact', thus asking for better synergies between underlying paradigms.

Considering the rich history and the vast array of scientific, policy and practical challenges, we can identify three major challenges for shaping the aim, approach and methods for future development studies at Radboud University Nijmegen:

a. Embrace Systems Transformation Perspective

Development studies face multiple – albeit mutually related – problems, such as poverty, inequality, conflicts, resilience, and potential trade-offs (or synergies) that can only be adequately addressed using systems analysis. Effectively combatting poverty requires simultaneous changes at multiple levels, ranging from global political institutions to local socio-economic networks. Such an approach must involve scientists with diverse backgrounds in a teamwork activity based on inter-disciplinary exchange and cooperation.

The systems transformation paradigm for Nijmegen-based development studies takes the best from three worlds. It is inspired by concrete actions at the bottom of the pyramid, involves a broader constituency of change agents and engages in concrete transition processes. This requires a professional commitment to focus on concrete transition processes and an intellectual interest to engage in debates between local agencies and global governance.

b. Enforce Cooperation for Change

System transformation asks for interactions between macro-level policies, meso-level incentives and micro-level behaviour to guarantee the scaling and anchoring of successful interventions. Changing the behaviour and performance of complex systems that support the development potential of poor people is usually not a smooth process as it tends to be accompanied by regular crises and conflicts, as well as intensive struggles.

Knowledge and insights into the dynamics of such system transformation processes are usually created by people working at the borderline between macro policies and micro priorities. Whereas local initiatives are vital to support inclusive development programmes, broader political alliances and cooperative networks are required for institutional anchoring and to guarantee coherent governance structures.

c. Exploit Interactions at the Interface

Fundamental changes in development dynamics can only be reached at the interface between bottom-up participatory processes with top-down structural

transformation programmes. This requires professional capacities for building interfaces and operational strategies that enable engagements at both ends of the development spectrum.

The traditional development interface was mainly focused on post-colonial North-South dependency relationships, whereas current interests cover a wider range of interactions beyond trade and aid, including governance, gender, climate, citizenship and culture. Shifting the power and the ownership of system transformation is a process of searching, learning and experimentation. The most impact can be expected from development interventions that simultaneously engage opposing stakeholders and develop effective interfaces for change.

Taking these principles seriously and recognising the importance of systems transformation for poverty reduction has always been the trademark of Nijmegen-based development studies. They inspire insights into long-term perspectives and guarantee short-term results for accelerating change. While problems of poverty and hunger persist, there are vast opportunities and great necessities for studying and supporting system transformation processes.

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