

HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND ITS IMPACT ON POVERTY?

Review of *Development Planning and Poverty Reduction*,
edited by David Potts, Patrick Ryan, and Anna Toner
(Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003),
and *Endless Filth: The Saga of the Bhangis*
by Mari Marcel Thekaekara (Zed Books, London, 1999)

Most developing countries have been involved in planning in one form or the other since their independence from colonial rule. In many of these countries, poverty eradication has been (and continues to be) one of the main objectives. How do we understand this exercise, especially its impact on poverty? Should we examine many case studies from different contexts and get a broad overview or focus on a particular context in great detail? The above books adopt these two distinct approaches. The first (Potts *et al.*, 2003) consists of essays on development planning by academics and development practitioners. It presents case studies from different parts of the developing world and discusses broad conceptual and technical issues. The second (Thekaekara, 1999), written by a scholar-activist, focuses on a subaltern group in India to illustrate a particularly tragic instance of the failure of development planning. Both agree that income poverty is just one of the dimensions of deprivation and “we must look at impoverished lives, and not just at depleted wallets” (Sen, 2000). Indeed, these two books complement each other in that Potts *et al.* (2003) focuses largely on income poverty, while Thekaekera (1999) explores non-income sources of deprivation or broadly, social exclusion, a concept that is important in both developing and developed countries (Sen, 2000).

The first theme of the essays in Potts *et al.* (2003) is the impact of planning and policies on poverty reduction. John Weiss looks at policies like macroeconomic stabilization, land reform and foreign trade liberalization and their impact on income based measures of poverty, with particular emphasis on Asian countries. While it is the only essay of its kind in this collection, it is useful as a quick survey of policies and their impact. The overall conclusion that, “growth matters critically for poverty reduction, but so do many factors. The nature of policy interventions is clearly one of these” (pp. 29–30) is reasonable, but in attempting to accomplish so much in a short survey, several important questions are short-changed—e.g. the discussions of land, labor and microfinance.¹ In contrast, the essays by Emmanuel Tumisiime-Mutebile and Michael Tribe and Nelson Wanambi focus specifically on Uganda, examining the impact of macro-planning

¹In micro-finance, for example, the recent literature (e.g. Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2002) has identified as problematic the requirement that borrowers make payments at regular intervals, undesirable consequences of peer monitoring and increase in transaction costs arising from an expansion in the scale of microfinance.

on poverty reduction. Tumisiime-Mutebile provides details of changes in the planning framework. In the past, Uganda implemented three year rolling Public Investment Plans (PIP), which contained discrete plans in different sectors and which were usually funded by external donors. Due to inadequate encouragement for domestic ownership, duplication of efforts and inappropriate sequencing of projects, Uganda has been making a transition to “comprehensive, coordinated, sector-wide plans” (p. 107). Since 1987, Uganda has also been undertaking a structural adjustment program. Tumisiime-Mutebile credits the adjustment program with resulting in higher growth rates and lower inflation. However, a big issue in development is whether such growth trickles down. In light of this, it would have been illustrative if the author had given more details on poverty reduction in the 1990s and on the mechanisms through which growth rates increased.

The second theme explored is participation, a fuzzy term, but one which is being used in many development projects today (e.g. “Participatory Irrigation Management,” “Participatory Rural Appraisal”). Participation could be an end in itself or a means to better project performance. Generally, this term has a positive connotation, but in practice, it can mean different things to different people involved in a particular project (e.g. donor agencies, bureaucrats). Moreover, the rhetoric of participation can be appropriated by different people/groups (e.g. local elites, bureaucrats, donor agencies) for their own agendas. Several case studies of concrete projects from Asia and Africa are presented—in particular, Caroline Harper, Paul Francis (Mali) and Richard Bond (Sri Lanka).

As somebody familiar with the highly charged debate on large dams in the Indian context (e.g. Drèze *et al.*, 1997; Roy, 1999), I found the essay by Stephen Atkins particularly interesting. He evaluates a plan by the Swaziland government to support small peasant agriculture by constructing a large dam and reservoir complex in the Lower Usuthu river basin and discusses several issues (e.g. water sharing among countries, environmental sustainability) that go beyond narrow considerations of economic and technical feasibility. Atkins argues that before decisions can be taken, these issues have to be comprehensively analyzed. In general, large dams involve the displacement of a substantial number of people and hence addressing their rehabilitation and other concerns is crucial, but this issue is not adequately discussed in this essay. While the other essays highlight the advantages of making development projects more participatory, Anthony Tsepko, in his study on Ghana, points out the adverse consequences. Based upon an analysis of Public Investment Programme (PIP), he concludes that, “participation, if not systematically coordinated, can lead to an explosion of projects and hence poor project performance. It could also adversely affect the disbursement of project aid” (p. 173). He evaluates the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) which Ghana started implementing in 1999 and which tries to address some of the problems in PIP by integrating capital and recurrent expenditures. From the above case studies, it is difficult to discern general “rules” that successful projects follow, other than that such projects emphasize understanding of local institutions and environmental factors and embody a belief that participation cannot be imposed externally.

The third theme is the determination and distribution of project benefits. Eric Londero examines two prevailing notions of targeting—projects that confer

more benefits on the poor than what they would have obtained otherwise and projects that ensure that headcount measures of the poor beneficiaries exceed a certain threshold. He argues that in both cases, it is possible for the non-poor to get significant rents. He therefore emphasizes that even when projects target the poor, policy makers have to be conscious of distributional consequences. The essay by David Potts draws similar conclusions from a case study based on Tanzanian data.

The most interesting essay on distribution is by P. B. Anand, who applies Sen's entitlement approach to the problem of water distribution in the Indian city of Chennai, which has chronic water shortages and the lowest per-capita water availability among Indian metropolitan cities (p. 208).² Since the entitlement approach focuses on the ability of people to command water, it emphasizes the importance of identifying groups that have restricted access to water. The key variable is a person's "water endowment," which is "the total amount of water one can get from existing property rights" (p. 207) rather than per-capita water availability. Based upon his fieldwork and census data, he finds a positive association between income and water endowment—in general the poor have less endowment of water (pp. 210–11)—which is not surprising. The implications of these findings and the entitlement approach for the privatization of water, which is being implemented in some developing countries and mooted in some others, illustrate the importance of analyzing the changes in water entitlements of people (especially the poor) rather than just focusing on changes in per capita water availability.

Potts *et al.* (2003) makes a genuine effort to combine different research methods and insights from different academic disciplines.³ While some essays (e.g. in Part IV, dealing with distribution) use mathematical modeling and quantitative analysis, others (e.g. in Part II, dealing with participation) are qualitative in nature. Critiques and ideas from other social sciences that are not well known among economists are presented and evaluated (e.g. the idea that development projects embody a belief in the "magical nature of technology" in the essay by Patrick Ryan and Anna Toner).⁴

However, Potts *et al.* (2003) is fundamentally an academic book. The same cannot be said of Thekaekara (1999), which examines the lives of "Bhangis,"⁵ one of the most downtrodden groups in the Indian society. The study focuses on Gujarat state in Western India, although some details from other parts of the country are presented. An estimated 0.8 million Bhangis live in India (p. 1), although they are referred to by different names in different parts of the country (see pp. 111–12). For centuries, these people have been involved in "manual scavenging," i.e. they remove human excrement, usually with bare implements and carry it (in some parts of India, in baskets placed on their heads) to dumping grounds (p. 2). In some parts of India, they also do some other tasks that are con-

²Chennai was formerly known as Madras and is the capital of Tamil Nadu state. Tamil Nadu has a longstanding dispute with its neighboring state of Karnataka, over the sharing of waters of river Cauvery.

³On the importance of this, see Kanbur (2002).

⁴For some of these critiques, see Rahnama and Bawtree (1997) and Escobar (1995).

⁵As pointed out by the author and the publisher, this term has a derogatory connotation. The author says that she uses it to prevent sanitization of the issue. I have retained the usage of the author.

sidered menial by people belonging to upper castes, e.g. removing the carcasses of dead animals, conveying the news of the death of relatives etc (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Although caste-based discrimination, especially “untouchability” (wherein contact with a lower caste person is supposed to defile) has been prohibited by the Indian constitution, the author points out that Bhangis and their children are discriminated against in their daily lives in many ways, e.g. prevention of access to well water (p. 66), segregation in schools, physical and verbal abuse of children (p. 45). The author argues that this discrimination, combined with the “psychology of the oppressed,” explains how the system reproduces itself, with the children following in the footsteps of their parents. The case of Bhangis also illustrates a limitation of using purely income based measures of welfare. In general, Bhangis are not the poorest in the Indian society, although this is tempered by the fact that sometimes they do not receive wages on time and have to depend upon money-lenders (pp. 52–3). Based upon the author’s findings (pp. 52–3) and Human Rights Watch, 1999, they seem to be economically better off than some other sections of the Indian society, such as agricultural laborers. However, the thrust of the author’s argument is not on poverty, but on the degrading and unhealthy conditions under which Bhangis live, the oppression that they face and the stigma that attaches to them.

The book argues that this condition of the Bhangis is a reflection of the dismal failure of the state (and civil society). Those familiar with the Indian anti-colonial movement know that the issue of Bhangis was raised by Gandhi more than a century ago (in 1901). Since then, there have been several government commissions, but their recommendations have not been implemented (pp. 5–10, 89–102, 115–18). For example, employment of manual scavengers was prohibited in several states by an act in 1993, but this has not been implemented satisfactorily (Thekaekara, 1999, p. 36; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

This book presents a touching and depressing portrayal of a group about which very little is mentioned in discussions on India. However, the author points out, without much analysis, that there is variation in the treatment of Bhangis across India, with some states (e.g. West Bengal) faring much better than the others (pp. 31–2). An analysis of the reasons (e.g. policies, implementation, historical/structural specificities etc) for this variation could have been useful in providing some guidelines for policy. As well, people belonging to certain lower castes have successfully moved away from their traditional occupations. As a noted authority on Indian caste system attests, “In India it is possible and, indeed, feasible to move from one kind of job to another in one’s lifetime, and with greater facility over two to three generations. Over 13% of Grade A services in the Government of India are today occupied by those whose predecessors were once considered untouchables. This percentage is bound to increase in the years to come. In that sense those who are descendents of so-called untouchables are no longer untouchables today. For them, at least, their caste position has changed significantly” (Gupta, 2001). If people belonging to some ex-untouchable castes have succeeded, why have the Bhangis failed? A comparative analysis with other lower caste groups could have been illuminating and could have been useful for policy. Similarly, it would have been illustrative if the author had explored in detail some

success stories (even if they are relatively few), where people escaped Bhangi status. Several lower caste groups in India have improved their position by taking over the rituals, habits and customs of a higher caste (a process referred to as Sanskritization; see Srinivas, 1996). One gets the impression that this process has not meant much for the Bhangis, but it would have been interesting if the author had explicitly analyzed this issue.

Overall, both these books should be of interest to people working on development. Potts *et al.* (2003) present a wide variety of case studies from different developing countries and clarifies some concepts (e.g. participation, civil society) and methods (e.g. effects method) that are being deployed in development planning. Thekaekara (1999) reminds us of a poignant case of failure of development planning and highlights the plight of a group, about which there is inadequate awareness both within India and abroad. While one can get a broad perspective on development planning and poverty reduction from the first book, insights on social exclusion come from the second—a book which also illustrates how the spectacular growth rates at the aggregate level which India has been experiencing since the 1980s can co-exist with the worst forms of oppression and deprivation.

SRIPAD MOTIRAM
Dalhousie University

REFERENCES

- Dreze, Jean, Meera Samson, and Satyajit Singh (eds), *The Dam and the Nation: Displacement and Resettlement in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.
- Escobar, Arturo, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995.
- Gupta, Dipankar, "Caste, Race and Politics," *Seminar*, 508, December 2001 (downloaded from <http://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.htm> on November 20, 2004).
- Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"*, March 1999 (downloaded from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/> on November 20, 2004).
- Kanbur, Ravi, "Economics, Social Science and Development," *World Development*, 30, 477–86, March 2002.
- Rahnema, Majid and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post Development Reader*, Zed Books, London, 1997.
- Ramachandran, V. K. and Madhura Swaminathan, "Rural Banking and Landless Labour Households: Institutional Reform and Rural Credit Markets in India," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 2, 502–44, October 2002.
- Roy, Arundhati, "The Greater Common Good," *Frontline*, 16, May 22–June 4, 1999.
- Sen, Amartya K., "Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny," *Social Development Papers, Office of Environment and Social Development, Asian Development Bank*, No. 1, June 2000.
- Srinivas, M. N., *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social Anthropology*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996.