



THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN DEVELOPMENT

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Today, I am going to talk to you about **ideas** in development policy.

Ideas—such as ‘the informal sector’ and ‘sustainable development’—play an extremely important role in development policy: for better or worse. I say ‘for better or worse’ because concepts such as these may be enlightening, serving to clarify our thoughts; but they may also blur and obfuscate - leading to lack of clarity and unrigorous thinking – and hence poor policy.

For the purposes of this lecture I define an idea as follows:

An ‘idea’ in this context is a concept which powerfully influences development policy. It is more than simply a slogan or "buzzword" because it has some reputable intellectual basis, but it may nevertheless be found vulnerable on analytical and empirical grounds. What is special about such an idea is that it is able to operate in both academia and policy domains

This is the definition from a book that I coedited with a colleague Morten Bøås entitled *Global Institutions and Development: Framing the World?*

The sub-title ‘Framing the World’ summarises a central point that I wish to emphasise in this lecture: that ideas, backed up by powerful institutions, exert a strong influence over development actors: development agencies, developing country governments, NGOs – and also development researchers such as myself.

What, more precisely, do I mean by ‘framing’. I quote again:

“The exercise of framing is composed of two parts: one drawing attention to a specific issue (such as the environment or urban development); two, determining how such an issue is viewed. A successful framing exercise will both cause an issue to be seen by those that matter, and ensure that they see it in a specific way. And this is achieved with the minimum of conflict or pressure.”

END QUOTE

This phenomenon of ‘framing’ is a form of what is sometimes called ‘discursive power’. It is an example of what is more broadly referred to as ‘soft power’ - to contrast with ‘hard power’, such as military intervention or economic sanctions.

In the arena of development policy, organizations (such as the World Bank), states (such as the USA), and specific disciplines (most notably economics) exercise power largely by ‘framing’. Our research suggests that such framing can be constructive, but also often serves to limit the power of potentially radical ideas to achieve change.

The second point I wish to emphasise in this lecture is a more practical, policy-oriented one: that in thinking and writing about development policy it is extremely important not to use ill-defined concepts in order to achieve an apparent consensus.

Much of what I will be saying today is based on a research project I undertook which I called CANDID. This was an acronym, standing for the ‘Creation, Adoption, Negation and Distortion of Ideas in Development policy’. What we did was to trace the origins and development of a number of ideas, including the two I will be particularly concerned with today – the informal sector and sustainable development.

These two ideas have withstood the test of time, even if they have been somewhat battered along the way. They have had a significant and generally positive impact on development policy.

Where did they come from? What was the policy context at that time? Who promoted (or resisted) them? In what sense did they succeed or fail? And what can we learn from these successes (and other failures)?

For an idea to be truly successful requires, I suggest, three things:

1. That it is widely taken up by ‘development actors’ (in their reports, conferences, conventions etc.),
2. That they have a shared understanding of what it means; and,
3. That it makes a useful contribution to thinking, and hence policy; promoting development and poverty reduction.

One might expect that ideas that are widely taken up would be those that:

1. Have some inherent merit – of clarity, rigour, insight;
2. Recognise the particular challenges that development poses in practice; and
3. Have powerful institutional backing.

Our research only partly confirmed this. It is certainly necessary to have powerful institutional backing, for example from a major international development agency; and to be founded on a solid understanding of the developing country context.

But the issue of analytical rigour appears not to be so straightforward.

Indeed, we found that many of the ideas that were ‘successful’ - in terms of being widely adopted - were, in fact, not clear and rigorous but rather the opposite. They were vague and blurred: open to differing interpretations.

We came to conclude that some ideas were, in fact, favoured for precisely this reason: that they related to contentious issues, but it was possible to achieve apparent consensus by making use of terminology which was in fact rather imprecise.

To understand this it is necessary to know something about how development policy comes about.

What shapes international policy?

International development policy is shaped by numerous international agencies: such as the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

By international commissions: such as the World Commission on Environment and Development, or the Global Commission on International Migration

By international Conventions: such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity

And by international initiatives: such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), soon to be replaced by the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals

These in turn draw on written reports, articles, commissioned studies written by researchers from universities and think tanks. In this process a language is developed which is a strange combination of the academic and the political/bureaucratic.

In the academic world it is most important that words are used with care. The meaning of concepts should be clear and consistent, to ensure rigorous thinking and shared understanding.

In the world of policy-making, the same principle should, ideally, apply. But in practice it is often found expedient to allow words to be fuzzy, subject to differing interpretations.

Or, in some cases, a concept starts out being analytically clear, but it becomes vague and ambiguous over time, as it is taken up and modified by others.

The main reason why development policy language is often unrigorous is that it allows disagreements to be avoided—or at least covered up—in the interest of achieving consensus. Such disagreements may concern contentious issues (such as abortion) or broader questions of prioritizing between different objectives - the environmental versus the economic for example. But ‘good’ ideas can sometimes make a very positive contribution – giving valuable insights, and pinpointing important issues.

So in what sense, more precisely, can we say that an idea ‘works’? Returning to framing, I suggest that an idea is successful if it:

- causes an issue to be seen by those that matter,
- and ensures that they see it in a specific way.

To illustrate I will take the examples of the informal sector and sustainable development. In each case I will give a short ‘biography’ of the idea: describing where it was first presented, and what was the policy context at the time of its inception. I will then demonstrate how it ‘took off’ in different arenas: academia, development agencies and the popular press, and assess what its contribution has been to development policy.

The Informal Sector

The term ‘informal sector’ was coined by a British anthropologist, Keith Hart, at the IDS (Institute of Development Studies, in England) in the early 1970’s, based on his fieldwork in Kumasi, Ghana. It was taken up by the International Labour Organization (ILO) following a joint World Bank/IDS mission to study unemployment in Kenya.

Visiting a large slum area of Nairobi this mission team came to realise that far from being unemployed, the people were very busy: making a livelihood by all sorts of activities – washing cars, selling matches, making shoes out of old tyres and so on.

They understood that the concept of unemployment which was appropriate in a modern economy simply did not fit the reality on the ground. This was the important insight that accompanied the ‘idea’ of the informal sector’

The concept fitted within an important contemporary debate on employment, growth and poverty. For by the beginning of the 1970s it was apparent that rapid economic growth had

been of little or no benefit to perhaps a third of the population of underdeveloped countries; and modernisation theory was being heavily criticised.

The conceptual difficulty of understanding poverty - and especially urban poverty - in terms of existing categories and theories was closely related to the policy challenge of reducing poverty.

Until the Kenya Report the focus of employment studies had been on what later became known as 'formal' employment, ignoring the activities of a large proportion of the working population: 'the informal sector'

This chart shows how often the word appears in six different arenas (or types of publications). As is evident from my empirical research—the concept took off rapidly in academic journals and PhD theses. However, more slowly in the UN and World Bank, and in newspapers and magazines.

This had significant (and in my view positive) implications for policy. Instead of being ignored – or, even worse, treated as illegal – these activities were in many cities given support.

What also happened, however, was an extension of the concept into other domains: informal housing, informal transport, informal finance, etc. This has led to some analytical (and perhaps policy) confusion, but the term has nevertheless been very useful.

In the years that followed, there continued to be major disagreements in relation to both analysis and prescription - and indeed the definition of the term itself. Apparently over 50 variations now exist.

But the idea did play a significant role that it played in the debate in both research and policy. It helped to create what I call a substantive consensus, relating both to analysis (i.e. what the informal sector is, and does) and to policy terms (what needs to be done).

What about Sustainable development?

In this case the order of events was rather different- The concept came not from academia but from the report of an International Commission: the World Commission on Environment and Development, often referred to as the Brundtland Commission report.

Here it is defined as development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

The policy context in this case was not the relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction, but the relationship between economic growth and the environment.

What occurred here was a merging of two global concerns: development (often interpreted narrowly as economic growth) and environmental degradation.

In the Brundtland Report of 1987 the environmental discourse became intimately linked with the already established development discourse.

Debate easily fell into a 'North/South' dichotomy. For some of those from the North, it was a challenge to have to reconsider their views about the environment in the light of the realities of poverty faced by many in the South. While many countries in the South saw the environment as not their priority.

The idea – sustainable development - took off even more rapidly than the informal sector. As this figure shows, the concept was rapidly adopted in all the various arenas: academia, development policy, and the popular press.

But in what sense, more precisely, can one say that this idea was successful?

Returning to my definition of framing:

It caused an issue – the environment - to be seen by those that matter. And the effect has been lasting - the issue is still absolutely central in development policy.

Not only have there been some huge international conferences – notably those in Rio in 1992 and again in 2012 – but also innumerable reports. It is now very difficult for policy makers to talk about development without talking about sustainable development.

And it caused the issue to be seen in a specific way; namely to emphasise the problematic relationship between development (seen as economic growth) and the environment (seen as stewardship of the world for future generations).

Although the Brundtland Report was not the first time the term was used, there can be no doubt that this was when the idea 'took off'; and the Brundtland definition is almost always taken as the starting point for alternative versions – even though there now exist over 100 alternative definitions of the term.

The concept did however, like the informal sector, also become rather blurred, as its usage proliferated. Thus we have other concepts such as 'economically sustainable', 'financially sustainable', 'socially sustainable', etc. which have little or nothing to do with the environment.

As is also the case with some other ideas we studied, they may encourage the 'depoliticisation' of debate: i.e. tending to ignore or underplay policy conflicts and power imbalances between actors.

More recently, following the Rio+20 conference in 2012, other related concepts have begun to appear which are still less incisive than sustainable development; they seem to suggest that there is no contradiction to be resolved: for example the terms: ‘green growth’ – and now even ‘inclusive green growth’.

In summary, I would argue that sustainable development – like the informal sector – has been a successful idea. It has helped to keep the environment high on the development agenda, while also drawing attention to the tension – or even conflict – between economic growth and environmental wellbeing.

In order to make a difference, it seems that an idea must move out of the protected world of academia into the messy, political world of action. This may come at the expense of some – but hopefully not all – of its analytical rigour.

Another idea which has been quite successful is ‘human development’, associated especially with the UNDP and the economists Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen. This served to emphasise the importance of values other than growth in gross domestic product – such as levels of health and education.

I would contrast ideas such as these with other concepts which have become very much used in development policy but which, for a variety of reasons spelled out in the readings, have in my view not served such a useful purpose: good governance and social capital, are examples.

CONCLUSION

Although we may not be aware of it, our thoughts – and hence also our actions – are very much shaped by the words we use. It is an important insight in political science that ‘framing’ – as I have described it – is a source of power.

Ideas, such as ‘the informal sector’ and ‘sustainable development’, play an important role in development policy. But not all new ideas are equally useful. Indeed some serve rather to deter rigorous thinking.

As a student, researcher or development professional it is very important to be on the alert for fuzzy ideas, blurred concepts. Planning development involves making hard choices between competing priorities. And it involves trying to understand complex and often alien situations.

Ideas should not be used to gloss over real and important disagreements about policy choices and priorities.

They should be used to sharpen, not blunt analysis.

Fig 1. Usage of the Term 'Informal Sector'

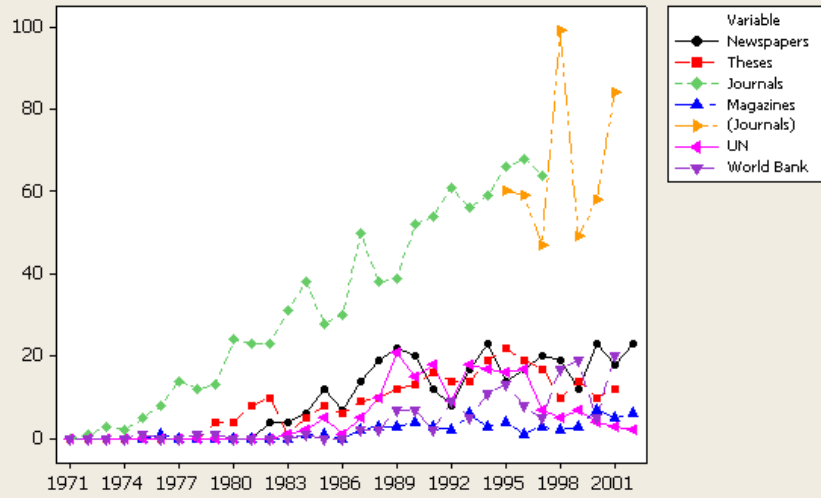


Fig 2. Usage of the Term 'Sustainable Development'

