

DEVELOPMENT GEOGRAPHY – A CONTESTED FIELD

(An outline by Detlef Müller-Mahn and team, updated 26.03.2024)

Why is „development“ contested?

We are referring to „development“ in inverted commas in order to indicate its discursive nature as a field of contestation, power struggles, and practice. The notion of development has long been criticized and rejected for a number of reasons. A key argument questions its implicit normativity that takes Western values for granted, claiming their universality, and superimposing them over societies and cultures in the Global South. In a similar vein, development is seen as a continuation of colonialism and Western domination in the disguise of aid and modernisation. We believe that these critiques are highly relevant. At the same time, we do also acknowledge that critical authors especially from the Global South have highlighted development as freedom (Amartyar Sen), liberation (Andre Gunder Frank, Paolo Freire), and emancipation. Against this backdrop, we understand „development“ as a contested research field.

What is „development geography“?

Development geography acknowledges the critical debates and conceptual disagreements mentioned above, taking them as an orientation for empirical research in the Global South. It builds upon the theoretical approaches and methodologies of human geography, and applies them to studies within the contested field of development. Development geography is particularly interested in the emergence of uneven development, exploitation and injustice, furthermore in the causes and consequences of power hierarchies, domination and dependency, and in social-ecological transformation.

What does that have to do with space?

Development is deeply inscribed in space. Social inequalities and spatial disparities are mutually related. Imaginations of desirable futures are often projected into specific spatial contexts (e.g. development corridors), and development planning aims at the transformation of social-economic conditions and spatial structures. This relationship is what we explore in our research.

What does development have to do with future-making?

The field of development is constituted by controversies over norms and values, good intention and vested interest, meanings and models, which are dominated by powerful actors and strategic alliances. In that sense, we view „development“ not only as the materialisation of „the will to improve“ (Tania Murray Li 2007), but as a discursive construction of „dreamscapes of modernity“ (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, Müller-Mahn 2020). Dreamscapes may be understood as imaginations of desirable futures, which are inspired by models of already existing positive examples. Developmental dreamscapes are, in other words, not merely the product of „fictional expectations“ (Beckert 2016), but they are created through the appropriation of models and ideas, and may themselves become building blocks of the future.

How do we do research ?

„Doing“ development geography under the concerns formulated above requires collaborative approaches together with researchers in and from the Global South. In other words, research „with“ and not „about“. Current research in our working group focusses on travelling models in the context of „development“. The notion of development resonates promises of a better future, which build – at least implicitly – on values embedded in heterogeneous cultural frameworks. Models and ideas „travel“ with the help of translators, who adopt and modify them in order to fit them into their own

frame of reference. We are studying these processes from a Political Ecology perspective, with a focus on power, hegemony, dependency and resistance. Recent case studies investigated the role and translation of travelling models in Africa:

- The paradigmatic idea of „adaptation to climate change“ and how it is negotiated in the United Nations-led Conferences of Parties (COP), translated into national environmental politics, and finally gets implemented in local projects in Ethiopia and East Africa (Müller-Mahn et al 2020).
- The green growth/green economy model, that was originally designed in South Korea, then promoted by international organisations like the UNESCO, and finally copy-pasted into the Kenyan national plan.
- In the Collaborative Research Center (CRC-TRR 228) we are studying the practices of future-making, social-ecological transformation, and politics of aspiration. The present project focusses on dams and mega-infrastructures, which are playing important roles as symbols of modernisation even if they are not (yet) completed (Müller-Mahn et al 2021).
- A collaborative project together with partners in the UK, France, Senegal and Ethiopia investigates the Great Green Wall megaproject and its imaginations of green futures.