The Challenges and Obstacles in Development Studies: A Sociological Perspective

Philip O. Sijuwade
School of Urban and Public Affairs, University of Texas, Arlington, Texas

Abstract: Berger emphasizes the difference between being a researcher and being a practitioner and he forwards a view that the role of sociology is to explore ways of understanding social phenomena not to prescribe solutions to social problems. The quote is a useful starting point for a discussion that examines the relation between sociology and development studies and development in practice. What is the difference between a sociology researcher and a policy advocate? What is the difference between posing a sociological question and giving policy recommendation? The following text aims at defining sociology's role and at delineating what challenges sociology faces. In the context of development studies. The research method employed is exploratory in nature.

Key words: Phenomena, sociology researcher, policy advocate, NGOs, game, sociological perspective

INTRODUCTION

Sociology in the context of development: Research related to development work is increasingly becoming multidisciplinary. Hence, sociology as well as anthropology is given more space alongside a previously dominating focus on economics in studies aiming at describing and understanding different aspects of poverty and change. However this invitation also brings great challenges to sociology as an academic discipline.

Development studies are linked to an aim at improving people's lives. This has a bearing on research conducted since it provides temptations for the researcher to take on a role of a participating actor attempting to solve vital, perhaps even urgent, practical problems. These temptations and expectations come from several directions, while undertaking fieldwork in rural Nigeria on participation and empowerment in development issues, I came into contact with some of the difficulties poor people are facing on a daily basis.

Through listening to stories of villagers and NGO staff, through being invited into people's lives and gradually understanding everyday struggles and problems, it is easy to feel a personal wish as well as a moral obligation to give something back. And expectations to do so are not imagined but often clearly expressed from interviewees in various ways. My presence in the village was met by skepticism what is my benefit? as well as cordial invitation into people's houses for shared inquiry into each other's lives. Whether tainted by a reserved or a friendly attitude, meetings very often resulted in thoughts about what role I could play if any in people's strivings towards a better life. Although this is not expressed in a clear way, the tone in much of today's

development literature forward similar expectations. The researcher is expected to take on an active role in the field through action research promoting local empowerment or through using the researcher's (relatively) powerful position to argue strongly for a particular development approach that is declared as more appropriate than others.

Expectations are not only expressed in relation to the role of the researcher but also in relation to the actual results presented from empirical work. In the book, To Bite the Hands that Feed, Lewis (2002) identifies externally-driven, applied agenda as the one danger that anthropology is facing and requests that anthropology carefully reviews its relationship with development studies. Sociology shares problems related to expectations coming from an externally driven research agendas. The research undertaken is expected to result in short and clear policy recommendations, which severely limits the possibility to elaborate on topics in a more academic fashion.

Working as a researcher in a development context one may ask are these not reasonable expectations? The immediate answer would be yes. Academic work in general has since long been criticized for being too distant from reality and for treating the researched as passive objects rather than active subjects. Many sociologists, Norman Long among them have criticized a bias towards theoretical focus on structure and a neglect of the active and purposive individual (Long, 2001). Long, working as a sociologist within development studies, emphasizes the importance of an actor-oriented approach based on recognition of the concept of agency. The critique has also been met by the development of new methods such as action research and different types of people's

participation. Sociology is continuously exploring new ways of relating to the researched moving from emphasis on distance and objectivity to seeing closeness and empathy as important features of the research process.

However, the answer yes to the question just posed harbors several interpretations of how the researcher's engagement should be expressed. A more appropriate question to explore than the one posed above would hence be to look into how the researcher's responsibility and engagement vis-à-vis reality and the researched can be expressed. In order to do this we need to open up for a more general discussion on how we may define the role of sociology in society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In search for meaning: posing sociological questions: Sociologist Berger Identifies a skeptical attitude as one important characteristic of sociological studies (Berger, 1996). This is an essential starting point if sociology is to achieve what Berger describes as sociology's task which is to show new interpretations of already known things to question the taken for granted and to contribute with an interpretation that tells something more than just the sum of information acquired through empirical work.

How then may we reach the knowledge sociology aspires to achieve? How do we transcend the already known and reach an interpretation of social life, which is more than the sum of experience of many individuals? Sociologist Long discusses the art of exploring social phenomena through elaborating on the precarious but essential difference between describing a social phenomenon and problematizing the very same (Long, 2001). This discussion is I believe, essential to sociology. One type of analysis may consist of elaborate descriptions of a defined phenomenon prevalence and contextual relations.

Without claiming that such an analytical outline is incorrect or useless, Long argues that such a descriptive analysis pointless or what we may call a-theoretical. An elaborate description will explain the phenomenon but in a limited way. It will give us the comfort of having achieved precise knowledge of the phenomenon in question but it will not have enlightened us upon its meaning. An analysis that strives to understand the meaning of a phenomenon will try various interpretations in order to see the phenomenon as something. A focus on meaning will not demand a different set of data compared to a descriptive analysis but it aims at achieving a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The strategy for achieving this goal is not to ascertain an increasing and abundant amount of exact and detailed data but to acquire

a flexible way of seeing. The ability to use various perspectives and to accept different explanatory models in order to understand a social phenomenon is crucial.

Long (2001) calls a lack in such ability aspect-blindness. While we should accept that theories are not identical images of reality, we should see theories as useful in that they provide us with different aspects of reality. Reality becomes intelligible through comparing reality to theories. This is how theories should be used and this is what seeing something as something means. A search for significance, the meaning of a phenomenon leads to types of interpretations that do not lend themselves to verifications since they are not necessarily based on empirical generalizations. These interpretations are exaggerations, like Weber's ideal-types and their values lie in the fact that they present a point.

However, elaborating on different interpretations of a phenomenon is but one part of the research process. The argument for a focus on meaning, rather than description is spurred by what Long (2001) calls greediness. Analyses focusing on descriptions based on statistical or ethnographic information are not necessarily incorrect as such. However, the sociological analysis remains incomplete if the process ends by an orderly account of what the data presents. Although such accounts enlighten us on important things concerning the prevalence and history of a particular phenomenon, the sociologist must, argues Long, continue the inquiry by asking the question, what does this mean? It is crucial to find a balance between data gathering (be it through qualitative or quantitative methods) and an aptitude for probematising data, which is inquiring into the meaning of the data that has been obtained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Is development research pointless?: Now how is this discussion applicable to an inquiry into challenges faced by sociology in the context of development studies? The caution raised by Long against greediness over data and a lack of sociological inquisitiveness that takes the analysis beyond that of a pure description is highly relevant to research done within development studies.

The claim that studies made in relation to development projects is directed by a pre-determined agenda is perhaps not particularly surprising. After all, such studies are made in order to assess feasibility to monitor ongoing processes and to evaluate outcomes of specific interventions. However, the character of studies carried out under the headline academic research is very often similar to project related studies. Also development studies and not only work related to development in

practice, carry expectations which have come to emphasize moral obligations vis-a-vis the subject studied. These obligations seem often to be interpreted in such a way that practice and policy recommendations rather than a sociological interest in the meaning of social phenomena is prioritized. This is obvious in much of the development literature, which is described by Ferguson as characterized by a focus on what in development interventions goes wrong, why and how it can be fixed (Ferguson, 1994). In his review of development literature he sees that cultures identify development as a great collective effort to achieve progress and analyses within this perspective are aimed at creating a basis for better performance. Similarly researchers Van Ufford and Giri (2003) use words such as manageability and social engineering when describing the character of development studies as well as practice. Again, the focus is on fixing things rather than on an inquisitiveness that allows for an emphasis on incoherence and complexity of social phenomenon.

In the context of Nigeria, the influence of donors is particularly strong. Research is being conducted with the main aim of producing material for modification of policies and development projects. In Nigerian literature, we often find that research is conducted with an aim at being directly applicable in policy-making processes. This is mainly put down to the fact that donors' interests are setting the agenda and studies are rarely conducted with results which can quickly be fed into the administration of development projects. Hence, the analytical as well as empirical framework is already set and the information acquired through studies is simply entered into this predetermined framework. New catchwords are quickly absorbed-gender, livelihood, hard core poor, sustainability but the role they come to play in research is often superficial. They are added on to an established working order instead of allowing for in-depth and inquisitive enquiries. White (1999) concludes that reports concerning gender issues, often funded by foreign aid provide information rather than analyses. She argues that development research in general not only that related to gender is characterized by positivism rather that a hermeneutic approach aimed at understanding the dynamics of society and social change.

In the case of participation and empowerment in development, a majority of the literature presents discussions that are linked to the advocacy of these concepts. The starting point is a conviction that participation can and should be made to work and analyses are characterized by a management and fixing approach. Although the literature presents insightful and critical analysis of participation, the critique is mostly elaborated on with the intent of improving definitions and methods. These debates aim at prescribing the use of participation resulting in texts devoted to increasingly detailed classifications of concepts and methods related to participating strategies. In other words, the analyses lack in what Berger sees as essential for sociology that is a skeptical attitude which will question the taken for granted, which in this case is that participation in development can be made to work so that democratic empowerment of the poor is achieved. The analyses furthermore have a fondness for detailed descriptions and neglects to ask Long's core question what does this mean? in relation to data gathered.

While these analyses are not useless, they are pointless that is a-theoretical. They may however gain sociological values by questioning the taken for granted that is that participation leads to empowerment of the poor and general democracy. Stepping outside the discourse of participation in development, we find contesting views of people's participation in democracy in classical social theories.

These theories present among other things discussions concerning the difficulties in encouraging people to express their views and practice their freedom and at the same time require people to comply with discussions made by a majority who carry ideas that go counter to your own and accept decisions that may inflict on your personal freedom. Adding sociological values in this case may also involve an understanding of social psychological aspects of joint decision-making, which reveal that fear of exclusion can make us agree to suggestions that do not conform with one personal beliefs of what is an ultimate solution to a problem (Bauman, 1990; Cook and Kothari, 2001).

Through applying different theoretical insights gained in other research areas than participation in development, we may capture the core difficulties involved in people's participation. They express essential complexities that do not easily lend themselves to managerial manipulations. A focus on these complexities in themselves, as social phenomenon rather than immediately tend to how they could be handled practically allows for a more generous analytical room. In this way, by practicing sociological skeptical thinking, we can question the generally taken for granted as well as the own pre-conceived ideas.

By problematising the data we have at hand, we may gain in-depth understanding of the core dilemmas of participation and thereby see it as a general social phenomenon and only as a development strategy surrounded by problematic behavior or structural obstacles. The discussions on development by NGOs

carry very similar traits to those of participation and empowerment (Kramsjo and Wood, 2006; Sillitoe, 2007). Literature often presents valuable descriptions involving historical accounts and contextual relations of NGOs. Debates which critically investigate the national and international political and economic arena in which we find NGOs are equally important. But again using Long's rather strong expression such descriptions are pointless that is they are limited since they only help us see a problem but they do not help us understand it better.

What furthermore makes discussions on development by NGOs problematic is that the detailed descriptions are being elaborated upon with a certain intent, distinguished by advocacy for the inclusion of NGOs as partners and assuming the ideal that is attainable. One example of this is the focus on improved organizational management of financial issues and of the staff in order to foster the right attitudes, which is visible both in literature and in the number of courses offered to NGOs.

Also, it is illustrated by the focus in NGO literature on external forces or inadequate internal reflection as elements endangering the real values of NGOs. And by attempts to identify and separate the bad apples from the true and genuine organizations within the NGO sector. This leads discussions into a direction that is mainly aimed at finding practical solutions to problems that hinder the realization of the goals and values claimed by NGOs. Lewis (2002) says that its tone, while sometimes critical of the attention currently being given to NGOs is usually to transform development process in positive ways.

Guided by visions or ideological convictions about how things should be may seriously compromise a sociological analysis, since it risks failing to scrutinize what these visions actually consist of in terms of underlying assumptions. In this particular case, the assumption concerns the values and characteristics associated with development NGOs. Scrutinizing these assumptions would mean posing questions about the dilemmas of altruism- Is altruism possible? What happens when altruistic values become embedded in routines? These questions direct us to rather different inquiries than those that are more practically oriented focused on how we may restore the true NGO spirit in a growing but morally endangered NGO-sector.

Social engineer, revolutionary leader, or a silent-researcher?: The task of sociology cannot be discussed without also considering what role the sociologist should take on and there are distinctitively different views on this. The topic has been discussed since the dawn of sociology as an academic discipline. Durkheim, Marx and Weber respectively argued for a sociologist playing the role of a social engineer, an advocate for the oppressed and an academic who be as detached as possible from political or any other active mission for social change in society.

The skeptical attitude identified by Berger (1996) as an important trait of sociology is a reflection of his view of the role of the sociologist. He argues that the sociologist should aim to understand society. This does not involve practical work such as engaging in the actual solving of a problem. While the object of study may first appear to be the same for a sociologist and say, a social worker, their respective aims are difficult in that the social worker tried to solve what is experienced as a problem in society (for example, the effects of high divorce rates) and the sociologist investigates sociological problems (that is marriage as an institution). Consequently, their roles are different. Berger requests that for a sociologist, the attempt to formulate and investigate sociological problems or social phenomena should supersede any wish to fulfill practical tasks in society.

Berger's (1996) position resembles that of Weber, who argues for a sociology that should not impose upon society values of what is good or bad. Although Weber uses the term value-free, I do not interpret this as Weber saying that the researcher can or should be objective and neutral. Rather, I interpret his argument for a value-free social science as a request similar to that of Berger's that is that the researcher takes on a skeptical attitude towards information and explanation given to her reflects upon her own preconceived ideas and that she avoids taking on the role as a social engineer.

It is not that the task of the sociologist to present remedies to social problems. However, practitioners may very well use the knowledge produced by sociology in order to deepen an understanding of experienced social problems and then try to solve these problems. To simply say that skepticism is an essential trait of sociology does not guard against lack of empathy towards the researched or against lack in responsibility towards sociology's task to gain in-depth understanding of social phenomena.

There are different ways of interpreting a skeptical attitude in the context of social science. Kuhn (1970) requested loyalty towards the rule of the game that is rules concerning methodology, analysis and presentation of research results as well as loyalty to certain concepts and theories of a dominating paradigm. Feyerabend (1975) on the other hand argues that the disobedient researcher is a must for science to advance. In a historical review of how new knowledge has been achieved through scientific activities he draws the conclusion that insistence on the rules would not have improved matters, it would have

arrested practice. He argued that science should be characterized by criticism and skepticism towards theories and concepts not by an obligation to conform what is already known. Long (2001) remarks that, while in contemporary academic world, innovation and the breaking of rules is often praised, when practiced it is sometimes hard to be accepted by the academic community.

Chambers (1983), a social scientist whose impact in development studies is well recognized, seems to take a different view on this claiming that seeking problems and criticizing is indeed the name of the game within social science. The skepticism referred to by Chambers does however not appear to be of a refreshing and innovative kind that is a sign of freeing oneself from obstructing rules and obligations.

Skepticism, he argues has been very valuable in the case of understanding rural development interventions. However, skepticism may also be misleading once it has become the rule of the game since it may serve the interest of personal ambitions related to convenience and promotions of the researcher rather than the object of scientific interest.

Engaging with the researched: As clearly identified by Berger (1996) earlier, the role of a sociologist and that of a social worker is different. Chambers (1983) similarly expands his concern about the role and attitude of the researcher which results from a scientific point of view but are also related to any potential effects the results may have on those studied. The researcher should not only be skilled in her profession including methodology and theoretical scrutiny but also be working according to the ethics of putting the last first. In practical terms, the reversal of order involves an ethical guidance based on advocacy for the poor and powerless when choosing research questions in presenting and being responsible for the use of produced results and most of all, it implies special methods for gathering data. With conventional methods, realities that are of great importance to the last, the poor and powerless, risk being missed out. This can be remedied by practicing participatory research in which the researcher not only goes to and experiences life in the field but also transfers initiatives as to what issues to investigate to the people in question.

As we see, there are considerable differences in perception of what role and responsibility the researcher ought to take on with Berger (1996) arguing for a clear separation between the sociologist as a professional academic and a practitioner and Chamber (1983) request that the academic and the practical should to some extent, merge that is the researcher should take on the role which

involves a moral obligation to look out for the weak and vulnerable. Behind Chamber's demand lies a call for change in research that would allow for the studied individual to have a voice and thereby inviting new and crucial information to have an impact on theories and policies alike. With that, I agree as well as with Chambers (1983) concerns about a skepticism that has come to serve a rather vacuous role for the advancement of knowledge. Chamber's proposition goes one step further though, when he suggests that the researcher should actively advocate for the last.

The way I see it interpreting the concept of an engaged researcher as being the same as taking on the role of an advocate for the poor in the research process will jeopardize a sociological approach which aims at providing a perspective that is wider than the one expressed by the single individual and of generating new knowledge without having preconceived ideas about what this knowledge should consist of or lead to.

Rejecting the role of an advocate does however not at all mean that a review of research methodology should not be called for. In what is often termed a feminist approach, closeness is emphasized rather than a striving for distance in relation to both topic and the researched, something which should be seen as a challenge for a research area that has been dominated by large scale surveys and structural analysis. Nor does a rejection of calls for taking on an advocate's role or merging research with remedy-seeking assignments lead us to a position in which the researcher is disengaged.

By aiming at understanding the phenomenon studied along the lines proposed by Long (2001) and by being aware of the dangers of bias inherent in any kind of research process, the researcher takes on both responsibility and an engaged attitude towards her research. An argument for growing room to sociological questions and inquisitiveness and for making a difference between the role of the researcher and the development practitioner does not have to imply a distance between academic and reality. Being engaged and taking responsibility as a researcher does not need to be related to a consciously chosen position that involves an active advocacy for the last or any other group. An analysis of the kind argued for here should not be interpreted as indifferent to either the field or topic studied.

CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by sociology in the context of development studies involves expectations to take on a role of a practitioner, be it a social worker or a policy maker. While it is crucial to acknowledge and understand

the concrete problems in people's everyday lives as well as frustration over failed operationalization of development projects as a sociologist, one should be careful not to be caught in a role aimed at delivering solutions to problems as experienced and identified in the field. A remedy-seeking argument assignment differs quite considerably from a theoretical academic investigation.

While a practitioner is looking for problems to solve the sociologist has a wider interest in social phenomenon that may not all present themselves as problems as defined from a development project's point of view.

Rejecting the role of a social worker or policy maker should not be interpreted as that the sociologist is indifferent to urgent problems people experience or that sociology is only remotely related to reality. Through being engaged as a researcher in the tasks of sociology as defined here means taking on both responsibility and empathy in relation to the researched. Through being engaged in such a way, through bringing an inquisitive sociology back in I believe knowledge can be produced that ultimately can be used to the benefit the recipients of development projects. A sociological inquiry will deliver better understanding of people's lives, priorities and perceptions of the world and better understanding of what influences the interplay between local reality and development projects.

REFERENCES

Bauman, Z., 1990. Thinking Sociologically. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Berger, P., 1996. Invitation To Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective. Penguin Books, Middlesex.

Chambers, R., 1983. Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First. Longman Scientific and Technical, Essex.

Cook, B. and U. Kothari, 2001. Participation: The New Tyranny? Zed Books, London, ISBN-10: 1856497941, pp: 224.

Ferguson, J., 1994. The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depolitization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, ISBN-13: 978-0816624379, pp: 320.

Feyerabend, P., 1975. Against Methods: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge. New Left Books, London.

Kramsjo, K. and S. Wood, 2006. Breaking the Chains: Collective Actions For Social Justice Among the Rural Ooor of Africa. Earthscan Publications, London.

Kuhn, T.S., 1970. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lewis, D., 2002. To Bite the Hands that Feed? Strengthening the Future of Anthropology and Development Research in Bangladesh. Dhaka University Press, Dhaka.

Long, N., 2001. Development Sociology: Actor Perspectives. 1st Edn., Routledge, London, ISBN-13: 978-0415235365, pp: 232.

Sillitoe, P., 2007. Indigenous Knowledge Development in India: Present and Future. Zed Books, London.

Van Ufford, P. and K. Giri, 2003. A Moral Critique of Development: In Search of Global. Routledge, New York, ISBN-13: 978-0-415-27626-9, pp: 336.

White, S., 1999. NGOs, civil society and the state in Nigeria: The politics of representing the poor. Dev. Change, 3: 307-326.