

Wacana Pembangunan/*Discourses on Development*

Editor's Introduction

Rethinking Development and Development Studies

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In recent years, the theme of development and development studies seems to be coming back to the scholarly community and policy makers almost with a 'vengeance' – at least in Malaysia. After its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s with the development agenda being high on the list and the state playing a developmentalist role, the idea of development – together with development studies as its corpus of knowledge and intellectual soul – came under the ferocious onslaught of neoliberal globalisation since the 1980s. The resulting 'big push' towards liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation in policy and the pervasive influence of the neoliberal ideology on scholarship with its thesis of the minimalist role and the retreat of the state, have resulted in the undermining of the development agenda and in pushing development studies into a *cul de sac*.

However, this neoliberal 'counter-revolution' has not gone without spirited challenge and resistance. A number of development scholars has responded to this onslaught and many notable scholarly works have emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example, Johnson 1982, Deyo 1987, Amsden 1989, Wade 1990, and Hettne 1990) that re-examined the theory and practice of the role of the state in development and its relation vis-a-vis the role of market forces. In Malaysia, besides books, journal articles and seminars, the institution of the professorial inaugural lecture by scholars in the field of development has served as an important platform to respond intellectually to the neoliberal offensive and to reinvigorate development studies. Jomo K.S. (formerly economics professor at the University of Malaya and presently the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development since January 2005), is one of the first – if not the first - in Malaysia to articulate publicly the need to rescue development studies. This was done via his professorial inaugural address in 1993, titled "The Way Forward?: The Political Economy of Development Policy Reform in Malaysia", in which he made sharp criticisms of the neoconservatives as well as Malaysia's development policy of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation. Taking a humanist perspective on development, Jomo stresses that human beings are not simply *homo economicus*, but as full human beings

with ... “various social commitments, family ties, religious convictions, ethnic loyalties, patriotic sentiments, psychological needs and moral beliefs” and that human society values things not only for their exchange value.

Subsequently, two other works which were also part of the inaugural lecture series enlivened the debate further. In 1999, the late Professor Ishak Shari, Director of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), UKM (1997-2001), delivered his inaugural lecture titled “The Earth for All Humanity: Managing Economic Inequality in the Era of Globalisation”. Arguing that development studies is alive, and one of its agendas is to formulate alternative models of development different from the Western model with a view to achieve ‘development with a soul’ and ‘development for all mankind’, Ishak maintains that a proper balance between the role of the state, market and civil society must be put in place to realise such development. In 2003, Abdul Rahman Embong, professor in Sociology of Development and a principal research fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), in his inaugural address titled “Development and Wellbeing” also took up the theme. In this lecture, he propounded the idea that development must go beyond economic-centrism to a more holistic conception predicated upon the notion that development is a historical enterprise to advance human well being, dignity and civilisation, and not merely to achieve material progress. He also proposed that not only must development address human basic needs, but very importantly, must embed the principles of partnership and freedom as well as human dignity and self-worth as its core.

As a leading social science journal in Malaysia, *Akademika* continues to pay special attention to issues of development. Two years ago, it published a special issue on development (*Akademika* 64, January 2004), with an editorial by the chief editor, Rahimah Abdul Aziz (2004), proposing a rethinking of development theory, concept and practice, together with several other articles focusing on certain dimensions of development studies and practice. Realising the need to sustain the discourse in a more systematic manner, *Akademika* - beginning from this issue – will devote a special section called “Rethinking Development and Development Studies” to serve as a platform for debates on development and its various ramifications.

This issue of *Akademika* will kickstart the series with two ‘think pieces’. First, a contribution by Dr Heng Siam-Heng, currently an associate professor at Universitas 21 Global in Singapore titled “Beyond the Ideas of Economic Growth and Economic Development”. Taking as his basis the two inaugural lectures by Ishak and Rahman that have triggered his interest in participating in the debate, Heng advocates the notion of ‘societal development’, and suggests that material development is only a means to societal development, which is the ultimate goal. In his formulation, he refers to Rahman’s idea of human dignity, self-worth and well-being that addresses the economic bias of development thinking, while at the same time, he opens a window for the formulation of alternative

development models that Ishak has called for. Heng also makes it emphatically clear of the need for development studies to also use moral philosophy and the spiritual traditions in the construction and refinement of the concept and practice of societal development. What is particularly interesting is Heng's proposition that the current level of consumption practised particularly by the rich countries is not tenable, that consumption must be controlled, and for that, a measure of the acceptable maximum level of consumption must be defined just like the minimum level of subsistence.

As a second think piece, we are fortunate to have another scholar, Dr Lam Peng Er, a senior research fellow from the East Asian Institute, the National University of Singapore, who has read Heng's paper in advance, and agreed to write a rejoinder to it. Lam's think piece is equally interesting. While agreeing with Heng on the need to go beyond the "Washington Consensus" model of development, he has reservations about Heng's proposition to curb consumption, and regards the suggestion to tap on the Asian traditions such as Confucianism to be the basis of the alternative model as "sheer Utopianism". Instead, he suggests the creation of what he calls "indigenous models of development". As examples, he draws attention to the model proposed by the Peruvian economist, Hernando de Soto, who advocates a system whereby peasants can obtain credit by using their land as collateral, and also, the concept of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, proposed by Professor Muhammad Yunus, a bank which provides micro-credit to the poor without collateral. For the record, it is worth noting that the Grameen Bank concept has already been implemented in Malaysia through the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM) which provides micro-credit without the need for collateral for the "sahabat" (friends) of AIM, and the system is effective in addressing poverty. For details, see Noraini Haji Idris (1999).

We believe that these two think pieces will be a good start to launch the debate in *Akademika* which we anticipate will be lively. Indeed, it is heartening that the interest and endeavour to rethink development and development studies is not confined to *Akademika* and its contributors alone. The leading social science organisation in the country, the Malaysian Social Science Association (Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia – PSSM), will be holding its 5th International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC5) on 8-9 August this year with the central theme, "'After Development' in Malaysia: Reflections on the Development Agenda and the Future". The Association's initiative to rethink development and development studies will certainly generate further interest and sustain the debate on the subject.

While conferences are venues for meetings, discussions, networking, and planning future activities, it is our hope that the forum initiated by *Akademika* will be sustained as an on-going exercise and will be received with warm enthusiasm by Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists, particularly those in the field of development studies. It is also our hope that these scholars will participate in the debate by submitting their think pieces (in Malay or English) on the

subject of development and development studies for publication in the coming and subsequent issues of *Akademika*. Through this debate, we hope to sustain serious efforts at ‘thinking beyond’ the existing development paradigm in terms of theory and practice, and in reinvigorating development studies in Malaysia.

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