How Does This Work? Capabilities Approach in MSU Development Work

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Because I haven’t yet done my research, I will speak as a practitioner. I am a ‘non-traditional’ student. Rather than studying straight through from high school to a PhD program, I spent years between my degrees first volunteering and then working. The majority of those years were spent working within the food security discourse, first in the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) project, then in the Swaziland component of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization’s (UNFAO’s) Food Security and Nutrition Information System (FSNIS) project.

The FEWS project came into being just after the Sahel and Horn of Africa famines of the mid-1980s and continues in changed form into the present. The portion of the system that collects and analyzes information from within the target countries started out with expatriates collecting data on the ground and analysts processing that information and writing reports from a Washington-based office. Through federal budget constraints and growing acceptance of the professionalism of African experts, this portion evolved over the years and several contracts the project has persisted. The first change was for the analysis and report writing to be done in the field by expatriates while local hires did the bulk of the information collection and the Washington office managed the process and edited the reports. Now, local professionals collect information, analyze it and write reports and are managed by regional officers some of whom are local and some of whom are expatriate. The Washington office provides technical and administrative backup, disseminates the reports written in the field, and provides digests of the information for public consumption.

At the same time, the UNFAO had started a food security information system in southern Africa, based mainly on market and food production information. In 1994, UNFAO instituted a new project (FSNIS) to add nutrition and socioeconomic information to the existing systems. I joined this project in 1995, the sole expatriate working with colleagues within the Swazi Ministry of Agriculture. During my time there, many friends and colleagues were hitting a ceiling within the ministry. These individuals had the same sort of training as me, but mid-level managers were not close to retirement, leaving no room for upward mobility within that structure. People wanting to improve their situations looked to the private sector, but there were few jobs there, either, an all-around frustrating situation. This got me to thinking that the time was not far off when expatriates from the North/West would not be doing on-the-ground work in development. What would my role in development, and that of other ‘northerners’, be then? For myself, I hoped that if there were no longer a place for me in the field, I might find a place in a university.

This brings me to the topic of this session: how the Capability Approach works in MSU’s development work. Development and universities—what should people at Universities do about development—not those within the Academy, people who have
already been trained and are now pursuing ‘science’, but at the University, the place of training in the U.S.? What is the role of research (the theses and dissertations of graduate students) in development? What is the role of instruction? Should only that research be carried out that will inform or improve the capabilities of people in poorer countries, such that we graduate students get to tell local people how to live their lives better? What then happens to research undertaken simply for the sake of gaining knowledge? Are we to stop such activities?

Actually, the University’s role in instruction provides an opportunity to promote the global civil society about which Nigel Dower has spoken. Within the University, we could train undergraduates how to be members of such a society, promoting understanding of other cultures around the world and acceptance that people on other continents and countries have just as much of a right to be happy as do people in the U.S.

But is the University the place to start? As of the 2000 census, only 24 percent of the population had completed at least a bachelor’s degree. Wouldn’t it be better to start in high schools, to be able to expose more of our nation’s citizens to issues of development and ethics? Then again, if this were started in primary school, we really would be hitting just about everyone in the country, and at a time when students still are excited about being in school. But to do this, we have to move one step further back and train the primary school teachers. This means introducing the concepts of development and ethics presented at this conference to undergraduate and graduate students in the College of Education.

But then there is another thought. Would this be forcing my (or our) ideas on others? The view of development and ethics espoused here is still normative, perhaps even ideological. How do we decide what are good development and good ethics? Who should make these decisions?