



The Relevance of an Actor-Oriented Perspective on Regional Development

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1. Assessment of the impacts of the development crisis

The economic and social impacts of Africa's development crisis affect specific populations, each of which deals with or reacts to these impacts in specific ways. Against the background of this dual perspective, a focus which tries to address economic and social impacts must centre on populations or categories of actors who are specifically affected by the crisis and who deal with it in concrete terms. In rural areas these populations are still closely related to specific spatial and ecological contexts,¹ and therefore the required differentiation among actor categories implies spatial differentiation as well.

If we also intend to include the environmental dimension and its probable negative impacts on the potential for future rural development in assessing the effects of the present development crisis, we must keep in mind that ecological effects are related to spatially specific land use systems and to particular population categories reacting to the crisis, and that they are manifested in complexes of ecological processes which take place within defined areas.

If we assume that rural populations affected by Africa's development crisis at least have a certain range of possible actions and reactions open to them, and if we also assume that the nature of environmental problems triggered in rural areas is a function of influences on ecological conditions within defined spatial contexts,² then any assessment of the effects of this crisis - which simultaneously intends to take account of economic, social and ecological aspects - will only make sense in a concrete spatial and ecological context, with clear reference to categories of actors who are affected by and who deal with it.³

2. Explanations of external and indigenous influences on development dynamics

Assessing the economic, social and ecological impacts of the development crisis affecting Africa will allow us to identify development problems in a concrete social and spatial context. But such an assessment will not sufficiently explain the dynamics which produce these problems and which also indicate approaches to solving them. Macro-level discussions of dynamics have been going on for a long time, and have been marked by debates over dependency and modernisation theories.⁴ Explanations based on these two positions, which have focused on the polarity between North and South,⁵ have led to more differentiated theoretical approaches, such as positions based on the theories of peripheral capitalism⁶ or governing elites.⁷ From the standpoint of rural peripheral areas, however, these further theoretical developments represent explanatory approaches which emphasise external dynamics and thus implicitly characterise development in peripheral areas as influenced primarily by external forces. This view is opposed by micro-level positions and approaches which put less emphasis on explanation of development problems in favour of trying to focus on and elucidate the development potential of local societies and local actors.⁸ Indigenous potential, however, is rarely or only generally related to external dynamics in these approaches.

A regional focus on development dynamics will make it possible to build a bridge between macro- and micro-level discussions and positions, particularly with regard to understanding the interplay between external and local dynamics: External influences which are part of the macro-level perspective - such as market conditions, national hierarchies and government environmental regulations, etc. - take on a concrete form in the regional context, against the background of existing economic, social and

ecological conditions and structures. At the same time, the potentials for action open to local actors addressed by the micro-level perspective are manifested within the context of regional development conditions, and within the exposure of these actors to economic and social hierarchies and networks. These considerations should make it clear that a regional focus would not replace explanations offered by macro- and micro-level perspectives; rather, it represents an attempt to integrate both perspectives by considering macro-level effects in a concrete actor-specific form, and by relating local actors to their supra-local exposures and dependencies.

This last aspect indicates that a supra-local focus, i.e. one whose scope is regional or sub-national, is even more necessary in terms of clarifying external and local development dynamics than in relation to assessment of the impacts of Africa's development crisis discussed above, which could well refer to a very local context only.

3. The search for problem-solving approaches

The search for possible solutions to Africa's development crisis is also affected by the opposing positions of the macro- and micro-level perspectives, which focus either on boundary conditions and external influences or on local reactions and indigenous development potentials. Considering development problems in concrete terms - i.e. focusing on evaluation of the impacts of the development crisis (see Point 1 above), and especially trying to clarify both external and internal influences on the dynamics of development (see Point 2) - will permit us to weigh these conflicting positions against each other and combine them in a strategy of regional development. This process of weighing and combining in the search for problem-solving approaches will therefore require a focus on the regional or sub-national level, in combination with an actor-oriented perspective.

It can be stated that any effort to address the problems of rural areas of Africa, which takes account not only of the problems of survival but also of environmental problems, and which seeks a better understanding of the dynamics of development - especially the relationship between external and indigenous influences - and also seeks to contribute to a discussion of problem-solving approaches, will require a regional focus which is combined with an actor-oriented perspective. However, this claim will first require clarification of what is meant by a regional focus and by an actor-oriented perspective.

Refereces

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¹ This statement is not contradictory to the tendency of globalisation of rural peripheries (see e.g. Werlen, 1995). However, it has to be noted that the global effects are filtered and modified in relation to the specific social and spatial contexts.

² It should be pointed out here that these considerations do not take account of the problems involved in valuing ecological impacts.

³ It must be stated clearly here that this does not represent the paradigm of uniqueness found in the history of geography and anthropology, because the position represented here does not deny that economic, social and ecological changes and processes exhibit characteristics which can be generalised. But specific combinations involving these three dimensions can only be addressed in concrete spatio-social contexts, and such combinations appear to be an important condition in trying to overcome the development crisis.

⁴ An overview on this debate is found in Nohlen, 1991 or in a historical perspective in Menzel, 1993. See e.g. also Senghaas, 1996, and on an evaluation of dependency theories Boeckh, 1982.

⁵ See e.g. Menzel, 1992, who discusses the limitations of generalising development theories, or Hahnsohn & Kappel, 1993(a) and 1993(b), who criticise the North-South polarity approach.

⁶ See especially Rauch, 1986. Related to this theory is the 'Bielefeld-School', see e.g. Evers, 1987, or Blenck, et al., 1985.

⁷ See e.g. Barnes, 1986, Cohen, 1981, or - with reference to Kenya - Himbara, 1994.

⁸ See, for example, the extensive treatment in Netting, 1993, or the current intensive discussions of indigenous knowledge systems (see e.g. Scoones & Thompson, 1994)