**Development studies**

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In Pakistan, many public and private universities have established development studies departments. There may be different views about their courses and programmes. As a development practitioner, I have a fresh perspective which is rooted in my work. I started my development practice as a social organiser, which is indeed an entry-level position but is considered the backbone of any development organisation.

I worked for two decades and reached top leadership positions. The field work gave me an opportunity to interact with the poor and ethnic minorities. I noticed their suffering, aspirations and survival strategies as they faced abject poverty. Simultaneously, I worked with diverse donors and international NGOs, which enabled me to observe the priorities and limitations of donor organisations conditioned by their home office’s political priorities or their country assistance strategy documents.

Being a practitioner, I learned that it was too challenging to materialise home-grown ideas with external funding as after some time, organisations’ survival takes a centre stage. I witnessed that almost all organisations deviated from their mission – to end peoples’ suffering – just to secure foreign funding. Another common flaw was that NGO founders were forced to act as fundraising officers. In the initial phase, peoples’ participation and enthusiasm was marvellous, but gradually it declined; and most of the projects became finance intensive rather than human-centred.

Consequently, development initiatives failed to meet the minimum expectations of the people and address real issues. Therefore, questions were raised about the development sectors’ competency, claims and commitment. The sector lost its appeal to young people who believed in change.

Now allow me to reflect on the syllabus of development studies programmes. Presently, a local university offers a four-year bachelor programmes in development studies. These programmes have become cash cows for universities. I am afraid that soon they will lose their appeal. This is because the syllabuses, course contents and teaching methodologies are accommodating in nature instead of being critical and reflective. In Paulo Freire’s words, the learning process is based on the transmission model of education in which neither are the learners exposed to alternative ideas nor are their worldviews challenged.

Prior to commenting on teaching methodologies, the first step is to know about the preparation of development studies syllabuses. As an academic, I have closely analysed the design and preparation phase. Bits and pieces on various themes are randomly collected in the name of development studies syllabus. In doing so, there is little or no reflection on the purpose of the syllabus. Resultantly, the syllabus fails to broaden students’ perception on ‘development’ as a grand narrative which should encompass basic social science subjects including political economy.

Development studies syllabus can be categorised into three sets: i) applied in nature, ii) policy-oriented, and iii) development agenda focused. The first one equips students with tools to apply in the design and management of development interventions. The second one enables students to unpack questions related to economic growth, stability, and distribution. The third set exposes students to international economics, macroeconomics, social policy, public administration, NGOs, sustainable development, environment, gender and emergencies.

In some cases, these syllabuses do not give an idea to students that in terms of the historical timelines, the global changes in economics and politics set national agenda and induce new intellectual traditions. A close observation reveals that some of the syllabuses look like a quickly assembled jigsaw puzzle in which all pieces are gathered but with a disfigured image. Therefore, students’ knowledge remains fragmented.

Most graduates are not even able to unpack the relationship between global causes, local exploitations, regional disparities, bad governance, South Asian politics and Pakistan's underdevelopment. Therefore, the need of the hour is to design syllabuses that enhance students’ societal understanding, analytical skills and decision-making abilities. Now the question before academia is how to formulate a local-focused development studies’ syllabus. There may be various ways, but one tested approach might be to start with a question – what should be the aim of a development studies syllabus?

Different universities and their development studies departments might have different aims about their programmes. However, a majority of development practitioners and academia seem to agree that development studies courses in Pakistani universities should be prepared in such a way that students are able to unpack global as well as local problems related to poverty, environment destruction and exploitation; understand relations between development plans and environmental agendas; and contextualise and analyse development priorities of a given society. It must be ensured that the proposed syllabus should enhance students’ belief in inclusiveness and respect for human rights.

Elsewhere, I have mentioned that the priorities of Pakistan’s development practitioners have left no time for them to document their experiences. Resultantly, academic citation from Pakistan’s development sector is negligible, except some references related to the Orangi Pilot Project and Rural Support Programmes. On the contrary, almost all development studies courses offered by international universities refer to case studies from India and Bangladesh.

It is true that our contribution in a global knowledge generation scene is way too low. There may be more than one reason. But one way to reverse the process is to blend teaching with research and practice. It is advisable that a significant part of development studies courses should be linked with practice. If academia fails to contextualise development studies programmes, there are chances that these will have the same fate as Pakistan’s development sector. This failure will also hurt the credibility of academic institutions. However, the main thing at stake is the wellbeing and development of people.

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