BUILDING A DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENTAL STATE IN SOUTH AFRICA: RESHAPING EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

by Hilde Ibsen and Sharon Penderis

Key points

- Investing in education is key to addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment;

- Relying on a one-size-fits-all educational model is not the route to follow;

- Indigenous knowledge should be incorporated into higher education curricula; and

- Living knowledge that combines community and university expertise is a transformative tool.

Introduction

This brief aims to explore the role of education in building a Democratic Developmental State in South Africa. Developmental states conventionally refer to the high performing economies and state-led interventionist policies of the East Asian economies from the 1960s. An interventionist developmental state drives the national developmental agenda through the positioning of state resources to promote national economic development through clearly defined development strategies and socio-economic goals (Johnson 1982; Woo-Cummings 1999).

The South African government has voiced its commitment to constructing a developmental state that is pro-poor, people-centred, participatory and democratic, and fulfils the ideals of social justice for all its citizens (Penderis, 2012; Edigheji, 2010). The ANC's 2007 'Draft Strategy and Tactics Document' stresses that a South African developmental state should 'mobilise the people as a whole, especially the poor, to act as their own liberators through participatory and representative democracy' (ANC, 2007: paragraph 59). However, a participatory democracy can only function through the involvement of an educated populace in decision-making processes, and as this Brief will argue, education needs to be more inclusive of indigenous knowledge systems to build that democratic base.

Education as intellectual empowerment

There is much agreement that investment in education and building capacity is key to achieving sustainable developmental states. Numerous scholars note that one of the key attributes of developmental states is building human capital through education and skills

training (Evans, 1995; Chang, 2010). Education is considered the route to escaping chronic poverty and is further a key mechanism in promoting tolerance to diversity (National Planning Commision, 2011; NRF, 2018). Furthermore, policy makers are in agreement that quality education is the route to achieving South Africa's National Development Plan. Development is multi-dimensional, as is also research and knowledge acquisition. We will argue that relying on a one-size-fits-all model is not the route to follow when building a developmental state in varied contexts. Following Edigheji (2010), a South African Democratic Developmental State should be understood as "a process that engenders social freedom, economic freedom, political freedom and environmental sustainability" (Edigheji, 2010: 10). It goes without saying that intellectual empowerment must underpin such a transformative state (Manor, 2002). Within the South African context, building a developmental state that is transformative will require an inclusive and holistic approach to research-based knowledge that includes the voices of the marginalised and vulnerable, for whom the Democratic Developmental State might be nothing more than an abstract concept. To achieve this goal, developmental local government has institutionalised participatory platforms within its subcouncils and ward committee system to enable public participation in matters of governance (Biyela and Xaba, 2009; Penderis, 2012).

Knowledges and contexts in higher education

For South Africa to succeed as a Democratic Developmental State that is inclusive and participatory, higher education institutions (HEI) have a critical role to play. The transformative role of HEI is urgent within the context of the decolonisation of knowledge debates and actions. Although national policy recognises the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into higher education curricula in South Africa (NRF, 2018), its implementation in mainstream syllabi remains limited: "The higher education system in Africa and South Africa in particular, is still too academic and distant from the developmental challenges of African local communities. The integration of African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) into the higher educational system could improve its relevance" (Kaya and Seleti 2013: 30).

Knowledge, however, is a sticky concept. In the West, indigenous knowledge tends to be dismissed by scholars trained in the rational scientific method (Karbo, 2005). Often transmitted orally and expressed in practical ways, it is perceived as existing outside the logic of science and abstract thinking. This has to a

large extent led Western thinkers to relegate indigenous knowledge to the category of folklore and superstition. Catherine Odora Hoppers, however, explains why a deeper understanding of indigenous knowledge has the potential to offer scholars far more than this. Using the southern African concept of *Ubuntu* as an example, she notes that in southern African cultures, self-knowledge begins with the notion "I am because I belong" rather than "I think therefore I am". She then shows how this turns Western rationality and its "eternal truths" upside down (Odora Hoppers 2013: 70). This challenges the received wisdom of Western knowledge and Eurocentric development discourse, explicitly putting communities at the centre of development processes. Interestingly, the 1981 African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights (the Banjul Charter), accords people the right to social and cultural development, within the framework of their own traditional values. Following the ideas set out in the Banjul Charter, the creation of Democratic Developmental States also needs education institutions to include knowledge based on peoples' lived experiences within their local contexts.

How to reshape education for democratic participation in South Africa?

The 'Rhodes Must Fall campaign', a protest campaign that erupted accross South Africa in 2016, sparked a blistering debate on decolonisation of curricula and paved the way for critical debates about the relationship between power, knowledge and learning. Furthermore, the debates called for universities to rethink their role in social and economic development and open up for breadth and variety. Globally, universities have been given responsibility for developing models for social justice. This task calls for rethinking of theories and methods. Critical theory is one alternative. According to Razmig Keucheyan (2010), critical theories "more or less comprehensively challenge the existing social order … and the contemporary social world" (Keucheyan 2010: 2-3). Radical social transformation is at stake here. In *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012), political scientist James C. Scott demonstrates that neo-liberal policies have created an "imbalance of life chances in the world" (Scott 2012: xv). This imbalance influences knowledge and development initiatives, enabling experts to devise top-down interventions. Scott invites us to look at the world using an "anarchist squint". Donning anarchist glasses requires us to look for narratives that reveal the contemporary truisms of power and elitism, and to make participation part of knowledge creation. Participatory methods are people-driven and aimed at developing the full potentials of people at the grassroots level through their active participation in development efforts that directly affect their lives. Central to

participatory methods is the concept of living knowledge. In its essence, living knowledge is about combining community and university expertise "for reasons of equity and democracy" (Facer and Enright 2016: 3).

Conclusion

We have in this Poverty Brief argued that inclusive education, one that acknowledges indigenous knowledge and students' local experiences, is key to the achievement of a South African Democratic Developmental state. This is also highlighted in the National Development Plan as follows: "One of the most critical roles of the state is to enable people to develop their capabilities" (National Planning Commission 2011: 409) and by Prof Makhanya, the Vice Chancellor of University of South Africa (Unisa) who asserts that "It is given that education must contribute to the critical capacities that are needed to achieve a fully-fledged developmental state in South Africa". However, the curricula taught at tertiary institutions today remains dominated by Western

knowledge systems. For instance, in the *Xhosa* language the word research does not even exist. The closest word is *ukuphanda,* which has bad connotations and means "to search for a bad thing, like a police investigation" (Nordling 2018). Decolonising higher education calls for pluralism and decolonisation of the mind. One way to dismantle the hegemony of Western knowledge systems is to rethink how research should be done. We recommend research that is sensitive to community needs and contexts, and that is co-created with people who know best what the real problems are at the grassroots level. This can only happen when researchers work together with local people in communities and start with people's own perceptions and knowledge about their situation. Local experiences should be included in the curriculum, thus making visible hidden and/or indigenous knowledge of importance to the creation of a robust Democratic Developmental State that is founded on a participatory democracy and diversity in the education system at all levels.

Authors

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