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The Geography of Development Studies: Leaving No One Behind

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Abstract Whereas the Millennium Development Goals sought reductions, the Sustainable Development Goals have set forth bold new objectives of leaving no one behind. This Commentary explores the continued geographic prioritization and exclusions within development studies research and some of the causes. The status quo is entrenching exclusion. A transformation of research, and the research community, is required to ensure that no one is left behind. Providing the evidence to support decision-making that is equitable and inclusive necessitates critical reflection of the exclusions that exist, along with innovation and creativity in how the research community can address gaps and support the more inclusive SDG agenda. Thought leadership and evidence will be the foundation that transforms our research and practice – if we, as a community of researchers, heed the call.

Keywords: SDGs; Sustainable Development Goals; development studies; international development; geography of development

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) signal a significant change in the practice of development. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which aimed for reductions, the SDGs aim for elimination. There is a bold new commitment to 'leave no one behind' (UN, 2016; UNDP, 2016). The Agenda is laudable and challenging. Significant investment and effort will be required to move towards achieving the ambitious goals. A 2017 Forum for Development Studies special issue explored what is new and different about development in the SDG context (Scholte and Soderbaum, 2017), which raised important issues such as those relating to data (Jerven, 2017), justice (Bigsten, 2017) and fragile states (Boas, 2017). However, we feel one of the greatest challenges facing researchers was not explored: the extent to which development studies research, and the community of researchers contributing to it, is well positioned to support the 'leave no one behind' agenda. We argue that development studies research prioritizes and neglects geographic areas of the world, which has the potential to further inequalities. We do not believe this is the result of individual choices, but the impact of collective decisions of the community of researchers. This results in disparities regarding what is researched, where and how frequently. Thus, we explore what causes researchers to select areas of research, and why, and what problems this might create. We conclude that enabling the community of researchers to ensure that our collective activity supports inclusive and equitable policy and practice, requires significant change – on the magnitude of MDG reductions to SDG elimination.

While we are supportive of the SDGs and the 'leave no one behind' agenda, we recognize that the SDGs themselves present challenges. The 17 goals, 169 targets and 230 metrics have the potential to replicate the decision-making driven by the MDGs. According to the International Council for Science and the International Social Science Council less than a third of the targets are well developed, more than a half need to be more specific and almost a 50 require significant work (ICSU and ISSC, 2015). While the Indicators and Monitoring Framework has provided greater clarity (UN SDSN, 2015), the metrics continue to lack clarity and many aim for reductions, as the MDGs did (Hak et al., 2016). The prominence of cost-effectiveness may prioritize value for money over human rights, equity and greatest need (Cochrane and Thornton, 2016; Eyben et al., 2015). However, this article is not about the specifics of the SDGs. Instead, we focus upon the aspiration and vision of the SDGs, of leaving no one behind, and situate development studies research within that conversation.

Development funding is not always given based on need; aid is influenced by political and strategic interests as well as historical and business connections (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Barro and Lee, 2005; Berthelemy, 2006; De Mesquita and Smith, 2009; Dollar and Levin, 2006). The result can be that individuals, nations and regions in greatest need are neglected, or underfunded based decision-making being influenced by other factors. Similarly, in the research realm donors continue to fund research that is not primarily determined by where the need is greatest. Consider research conducted on climate change. Major donors are not prioritizing nations experiencing the greatest vulnerabilities with the least capacity to respond, rather the decisions are driven by historical and political ties (Hendrix, 2017). According to the World Bank (2016) classifications, the UK-funded Climate and Development Knowledge Network has prioritized more middle-income countries than low-income ones (CDKN, 2016). The Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia, managed by Canada's International Development Research Center has done similarly, also providing funding to more middle-income nations than low-income nations (CARIAA, 2016). These donors do not determine where all research is done, but it does influence where researchers have greater opportunities (and likewise lack thereof). The result of this neglect and under-funding is that those with the least capacity and greatest vulnerabilities become even more 'left behind', relative to other nations.

The political nature of development funding – including that of research – is often outside of the control and even influence of development studies researchers. Notwithstanding, to what extent are the countries excluded in research funding reflected in research more broadly? Chambers (1981) identified six biases in the 'organized rural development visit', where the development professional has minimal contact with poverty and the poor, as follows: spatial, project, person, dry-season, diplomatic and professional. These biases negatively characterize the development professional, as a 'development tourist', whose brief field visits only contribute to misinformation and the 'under-perception' of rural realities (Chambers, 1981, p. 1). He offers a mea culpa, as a young researcher, when he was drawn to a particular research site ('project bias'), as result of its growing 'fame' amongst his colleagues (Chambers 2006, p. 20). As we argue below, this can – and does – lead to an over-representation in a particular scholarly domain or discourse (as well influencing funding bodies, policy formulation and misallocation of other resources).

Inasmuch as the SDGs demand a transformation of development practice, we argue that, as researchers, the development studies community must critically reflect on the way in which it might contribute to inequalities, and address them, lest the collective choices entrench the exclusion the SDGs seek to eliminate. This debate article is not concerned with locating 'where' development activity occurs (e.g. trends of international development flows and activity). Rather, it is concerned with locating the scholarly 'space' where development studies research appears to be focused and, by extension of this, neglected. For the purposes of bringing evidence to the conversation, we analyzed 50 years of publications (1964–2014) from the *Journal of Development Studies* (JDS), one of the longest running publications in the field of development. Our data collection and analysis approach was simple. We utilized the JDS publisher platform to search for countries, tabulating them on an annual basis. One of the primary limitations of this approach was that it did not analyze the context within which the keywords existed, nor their frequency within each article. We offer the results as a means to further a conversation about geographic disparities in research within development studies research and to encourage dialogue on how the community of researchers needs to be more active in addressing disparities that result from collective choices. We do not argue that this is a systematic analysis of the field, as others have done (e.g. Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Hendrix, 2017). Rather, we contribute to a conversation about geographic inclusion and exclusion with an aim to engage in a dialogue about how the community of international development studies researchers can ensure our collective work embodies the ambition of leaving no one behind.

Development studies research and leaving no one behind

As the literature on the geography of development studies has identified (e.g. Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Hammett and Gough, 2016; Hendrix, 2017), there are inequities in the geography of development research – our analysis does similarly (Table 1). We identify four factors that have affected the foci of geographical knowledge in development studies research: accessibility, population, language and relationships. Although these factors are meant to foster a critical conversation in light of the SDG 'leave no one behind' agenda, we fully recognize that no single factor, nor a set of simplistic factors, will explain where, why and when development studies research takes place. The

Most referenced	#	Least referenced[a]	# (Average if grouped)
India	1248	Bhutan	8
China	661	Small Island Developing States (35)[b]	396 (11)
Brazil	586	Slovak Republic	11
Mexico	572	Brunei Darussalam	12
Kenya	484	Post-Soviet Countries (14)[c]	195 (14)
Indonesia	443	Suriname	15
Philippines	395	Republic of Congo	16
Pakistan	389	Djibouti	16
Ghana	386	Equatorial Guinea	19
Tanzania	383	North Korea	24
Chile	369	Belize	25
Bangladesh	359	Gulf Cooperation Countries (5)[d]	130 (26)
South Africa	357	Albania	29
Nigeria	346	Eritrea	36
Peru	317	Yemen	36
Argentina	315	Central African Republic	37

Table 1: Frequency of countries mentioned, 1964–2014 (excluding OECD).

[a]Relatively new nations had very few references, but are not included.
[b]Including (in order of increasing reference): Cabo Verde, Curacao, Faeroe Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, Channel Islands, Isle of Man, Turks and Caicos, Aruba, French Polynesia, Palau, Marshall Islands, Bermuda, New Caledonia, Cayman Islands, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tuvalu, Antigua and Barbuda, Federated States of Micronesia, St. Kitts and Nevis, Sao Tome and Principe, Kiribati, Comoros, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Dominica, the Bahamas, St. Lucia, Malta, Grenada, Tonga, Seychelles and Cyprus.
[c]Including (in order of increasing reference): Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Estonia, Uzbekistan, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Latvia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Georgia.
[d]Including (in order of increasing reference): Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, excluding Saudi Arabia.

objective of presenting the data shown in Table 1 is to indicate the significant range of geographic foci in development studies research, one that highlights geographic prioritizations and exclusions. The results reflect only one journal, albeit one of the longest running and most influential, and thus the results ought not to be over generalized. We nonetheless draw upon the results to convey a challenge and to encourage critical reflection – particularly if the research community aims to play a supportive role in a shift toward leaving no one behind.

Accessibility

We consider accessibility as encompassing both the ability to conduct research (i.e. political openness of foreign researchers) and safety (i.e. the ability for researchers to conduct research in a safe environment, and have approval to do so). As an enabler and barrier to research, the list of least mentioned nations in development research appears to suggest this is a primary factor for influencing where research takes place. However, the absences from the list also suggest this is not the only factor involved

– consider the absence of countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, wherein safety to conduct research has been a long-term barrier; yet they respectively have almost twice as many mentions than Yemen, a country similarly challenged with long-term instability (Yemen: 36, Afghanistan: 60 and Somalia: 71). As a barrier, the lack of accessibility helps to explain some of the geographic neglect, and as an enabler also provides insight into the why the highly researched nations have gained more attention by the collective research community. In addition to physical accessibility, there are also draws to geographic areas based on a body of research and theorization. An example of this is research in India, where theories on gender and class have been prominent, and Ethiopia, where work on famine has been long-standing. Continued research in these countries can also be understood as a means of validating and furthering these theories, a defendable reason for the bias of 'famous' areas of study raised by Chambers (2006).

Population

Of the top 15 nations referenced in development studies research, 8 of them are also amongst the most highly populated. Research interest of highly populated nations is expected, as such research can affect large numbers of people and because highly populated nations play an important geopolitical role with their associated large economies (Hendrix, 2017). The relative outliers of the population trend are Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Chile, South Africa, Peru and Argentina, which are frequently mentioned but not amongst the most populated (consider the absence of countries such as Ethiopia, Vietnam and Egypt from the list). As with accessibility, population has outliers of countries with relatively small populations but much higher engagement by researchers, such as Mauritius having five times as many articles mentioning it than Brunei. As with accessibility, population provides insight into why these differences exist, but by no means does it explain all of them. Sumner (2011) found that the majority of the world's poor do not, in fact, live in low-income countries. We agree with Sumner that poverty alleviation efforts should focus on people experiencing poverty, not just low-income countries, but this must not come at the expense of low-income countries, particularly as middle-income nations have a greater ability, and responsibility, to ensure their resources benefit their citizens.

Language

The geographical distribution of research is greatly influenced by language: 7 of the most mentioned 15 countries have English as one of their official languages, and which is also the language of the journal. The majority of the remaining nations are amongst the most populous nations in the world (China, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Bangladesh). However, there are outliers that are relatively not highly populated nor is English a national language, such as Chile and Peru. Excluding the groups of nations, every one of the least mentioned nations does not have English as an official language, with the exception of Belize. The most populous of the least referenced countries includes North Korea, wherein multiple political barriers to conducting research exist, and Yemen, which has been plagued with instability during the past half century. Language barriers help to explain why post-Soviet nations, some of which have large populations and are relatively stable (e.g. Ukraine and Uzbekistan) have been subject to limited research. Similarly, the absence of five of the six Gulf Cooperation Council member countries might be explained by language and low population. However, with the unprecedented progress of economic and human development in these countries, it does beg the question why they have been neglected from research, even for comparative purposes.

Relationships

Language, population and accessibility explain some of the geographic trends, however not all of them. Another factor is the role of historical, political and personal relationships (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Barro and Lee, 2005; Berthelemy, 2006; De Mesquita and Smith, 2009; Dollar and Levin, 2006; Hendrix, 2017). By historical and political relationships, we mean colonial ties, political linkages, military alliances and business investments. Ties with former colonies offer examples of why certain research foci exist where they do. By personal relationships we mean the aggregate trends of individual choices, whereby particular regions are favored or neglected, as well as interpretations of what is, or is not, relevant for development studies journals. An example of the latter includes the journal *International Development Planning Review* opting not to publish works from former Soviet nations as they were not considered aligned with the goals and objectives of the journal (Hammett and Gough, 2016).

Reflections

This debate article is not about the existence of geographic biases in development studies research. This point is well established, and these disparities continue (Barro and Lee, 2005; Berthelemy, 2006; De Mesquita and Smith, 2009; Dollar and Levin, 2006; Hendrix, 2017). Nor is this primarily about the causes of geographic prioritization and exclusion, although we have discussed some of the reasons that contribute to them. Rather, these two points set the groundwork for invigorating a critical self-examination of geographic biases for the purpose of more proactively engaging with the field of study and the community of researchers to change the way we work. Researchers have the opportunity to support the 'leave no one behind' agenda, and challenge the SDGs to advance this objective beyond reductions and cost-effectiveness, but this requires that we assess the extent to which our collective action is leaving some behind, and how we might change course to address exclusion and knowledge gaps.

We believe that this call for self-examination is important, as Chambers (2006) argues, because some biases in our discipline may not necessarily be compatible for academic study, being more the fodder of anecdotes 'from the field'. Therefore, self-critical reflection on the nature of development research and the 'planned field visit' may provide the introspection needed to limit geographic exclusion in our discipline. Furthermore, as the global population continues its torrid pace of urbanization, biases can also influence the 'brief urban visit' leading to the dispersion of misinformation and unperceived realities of those experiencing poverty in urban as well as rural settings (Chambers, 2006, p. 13).

Accessibility, population, language and relationships stood out to us as key factors influencing where research takes places, and where it does not. This, however, is only the beginning of an important conversation. In analyzing these trends, we need to challenge the processes that result in geographic exclusion and neglect, ones that entrench global inequalities and negatively affect the most vulnerable nations with the least capacity. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs provide an opportune time, we believe, for this reflection, and as a motivation to ensure our collective research contributes to the objectives outlined in the SDGs – goals that will not be obtained if research and practice within development continues the status quo. The SDGs will be the leading driver of priorities, funding and attention in the coming decade and a half, and the issues of equity raised within them should encourage both development practice and research to critically reflect upon how achieving the ambitious goals requires a transformation.

Framed in this way, we view the identification of geographic exclusion not as a negative trait of the field of study, but as an opportunity. A moment to ensure our research supports and informs decision-makers. A time to ensure our collective choices contribute to the objectives of inclusion and equity. And, reason for re-analyzing the trends in order to offer guidance for researchers regarding where knowledge gaps exist, and provide incentive and motivation for new research to address them. In agreement with Hammett and Gough (2016), we view the SDGs as an opportunity for development studies researchers (as well as editors and journals) to break free from past conceptual constraints and geographic biases, while not abandoning respective foci and contribution. Examples of addressing gaps could be ensuring emerging researchers are informed of gaps and thus provide incentive for significant contributions to knowledge. Other options may include geographic special issues. We do not offer *the* answer on the means to transformation, but wish to spur discourse and encourage innovation and creativity in the diverse ways in which we meet the demands placed upon the community of development studies researchers as we provide the thought leadership and evidence to transform our world, leaving no one behind.

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