Responsibility Development in a Polycentric World

Inequality, citizenship and the middle classes

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the global scenery has been changing rapidly. Some of the largest developing countries have become the ‘rising stars’ of the world economy, and their dynamic economic development has contributed to reaching some of the most important Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, many other developing countries have not reached the MDGs, their economies are stagnating or dependent on a few commodities and their volatile world market prices. These countries are being marginalized in the global race for world market shares between the old industrial and the newly industrializing countries. Among the latter, China in particular is envied by old Europe mired in the continuing euro crisis and the widening gap between its relatively financially stable northern core and its economically stagnating or declining southern periphery. On Europe’s southern borders, the Arab “Spring” has not yet produced the modern democracies many of the protesters insisted upon. Since the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries are crucial for global energy supplies (hydrocarbons today and tomorrow, and, possibly, through solar energy in the future), the prospects for Europe’s economic recovery are also linked to the unpredictable political developments in these countries. The old North-South divide is giving way towards a polycentric world with new centres and peripheries, and with criss-crossing trade flows between nodal networks and global peripheries, where China, India, South Africa and Brazil are competing with Europe and North America for Africa’s commodities.

A specific aspect of the rising middle-income countries is the development of a middle class of several hundred million Chinese, Indians, Brazilians and others who are aspiring to life-styles comparable to those of affluent consumers in more developed countries. These so-called ‘new’ middle classes in the Global South tend to be less wealthy as yet, compared to e.g. European middle class consumers, but as a group they have considerable purchasing power. Their aspirations extend further towards determining a stronger political role in the governance of their countries. Thus, the new middle classes in the emerging economies are becoming a new force with which to be reckoned. Their values and practices might influence future perspectives globally, be it a more equitable and just world or a world in which the rich and wealthy
increasingly condone and actively support rising inequalities between social groups, at regional and country levels. Therefore, which alliances the new middle classes in emerging economies and existing middle classes in high-income countries and their representative governments need to understand and seek for a global system of wealthy and democratic countries that manage global public goods cooperatively (*global governance*) and are capable of solving conflicts peacefully.

However, in a finite world at least in the short-term economic aspirations of the growing new middle classes tend to conflict with the claims of middle classes in the North aiming to maintain their lifestyles and consumption levels, particularly because the rising global demand for commodities and energy is driving up world market prices of both. Thus, there are both common and conflicting interests between the old and the new middle classes in this polycentric world. It is politically, economically and environmentally relevant to discover these diverging interests between old industrial and newly emerging countries. It is essential to soberly examine the role of the middle classes, their will and their power in steering their countries towards peace, remaining within ecosystem limits and avoiding conflicts over scarce resources and international spill over effects of environmental damages.

Poverty, inequality and sustainability continue to be the world’s major development challenges and the EADI 2014 General Conference in Bonn will delve into these issues with a focus on those groups in society who can potentially contribute effectively to responsible development in a polycentric world.

### 2. Implications for domestic processes of change

International Development Studies have traditionally focused their attention on the two poles in developing societies: the elites - the decision-makers with economic and/or political power - and the poor - who tend to be treated as passive actors. The in-between groups have received a great deal of attention from the social sciences in industrialized societies. In developing countries this field is still nascent. A few studies have emphasized how emerging groups of successful entrepreneurs and civil servants (such as teachers) are important to a society, not only for employment creation but also as a potential trigger of political change and democracy. Another important strand in the literature challenges these implicit progressive assumptions about the behaviour of the new middle class citizens, and, instead, emphasizes a possible new class struggle. These scholars see the new middle classes as a relatively conservative political force aiming to distance itself as much as possible from ‘the poor’ both physically and ideologically. So, instead of pushing for progressive policies, most of them would not take responsibility for fighting against continued poverty, inequality and conflict in their own societies, let alone in other poorer countries. As development scholars, political activists and policy makers it is necessary to know more about how these emerging middle class groups will change the policy environment for development processes, and new forms of development
cooperation. How will they mobilize and for what reasons? Can education play a key role in raising awareness and stimulating social change, especially when teaching stimulates critical thinking and equips people with the skills, values and knowledge to become active global citizens striving for social justice and more sustainable life styles?

The way citizenship is constructed within societies is strongly linked to the valuation of social classes on the one hand and the dimensions of citizenship recognized by dominant development discourses on the other. Whereas early discussions in the period of decolonization focused on the role of political citizenship, discussions in the late 1980-90s focused more on socio-economic dimensions of citizenship, social mobilization and the relation between various marginalized social groups and the state. The strong social movements in various countries in that period supported the strengthening of socio-economic citizenship of marginalized groups (on ethnic, cultural or other grounds). Moreover, gender equality and empowered women are often stated to be catalysts for multiplying development efforts. In developing countries, the economic empowerment of women is a prerequisite for sustainable development, pro-poor growth and the achievement of all the MDGs. The UN Global Compact has developed the “Women’s Empowerment Principles” which aim to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community. A key challenge for the coming decade will be to develop a more gendered approach to responsible development in a polycentric world.

In recent years neo-liberal discourses and privatization initiatives have led middle-class groups to believe that their citizenship rights were being hollowed out; being reduced to consumer rights only by privatization and globalization. More locally, the growing middle classes in many countries in emerging economies in the south built up assets, which they felt were insufficiently protected by the state, as insecurity and privatization reduced the role of local and national governments. Several types of middle-class reactions have been noted, like migration to larger cities, emigration to more developed countries, gentrification of urban areas, the expansion of gated communities, and other forms of local and community-based policing. In addition, negotiations around the quality of national governments, tax systems and their evasion are new issues on the agenda.

Such issues and their implications for the forms of citizenship, the growth of inequalities and forms of social and political injustice are some of the issues that can be fruitfully explored at the conference. For example, the different North African and Turkish “Springs” have revealed the strength as well as weaknesses of the relatively educated, underemployed, and often assumed a-political citizens in these countries. The current mass demonstrations in Brazil only a year before the World Football Cup there are just another example for the new assertiveness of the next generation of the middle classes, the twittering “facebook generation” that is benefitting from the rallying potential of the new communication technologies. Another important issue is the role of migration, diasporas, and remittances in relation to responsible development, searching for ways to turn the ‘brain drain’ into a ‘brain gain’
3. Implications for the international development agenda

Countries like China, India, Brazil, but also South Korea, Mexico, Indonesia, South Africa and Nigeria are increasingly co-determining the future of the world, both economically and with regards to international politics. The interactions between the elites and the middle classes in these countries are crucial for the legitimacy and the stability of their regimes. Notwithstanding the fundamental differences between the political structures of these rising powers, their governments tend to respond to (perceived) needs and priorities of certain middle class segments while often dismissing the claims of other groups. Moreover, these new major players have challenged traditional ‘western’ aid priorities and modalities, and are increasingly putting up their own development models as examples for poorer countries. Whether or not the new middle classes will support their government’s engagement in international cooperation (such as for the provisioning of global public goods) is an open question for International Development Studies.

In Europe, due to the financial and euro crisis, cuts in government budgets and other austerity measures support for development cooperation seems to be dwindling. Middle class citizens have always been the strongest supporters of development cooperation, either as supporters for political parties who favour larger aid budgets or as financial supporters giving money to private aid agencies. A growing disillusionment with current aid modalities, signals doubts about its effectiveness and the tendency to prioritize national problems in times of crisis also seem to have their effects on the way middle classes evaluate development cooperation. Some might even be influenced by populist voices, which propagate the end of aid. However, such reactions may be only one side of the picture. In several (Northern) European countries support for development cooperation does not seem to suffer from right-wing populism. Aid volumes have been stabilised or are growing also under conservative governments in some countries in Northern Europe.

Furthermore, so-called Private Initiatives (PIs) have been on the rise in the last decade. In times of globalisation and global travel, individual citizens, confronted with poverty in the countries they visit, are organising their ‘own’ development cooperation. Thousands of small groups of citizens are collecting on a local scale support for schools, hospitals orphanages in countries in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. Most of the travellers involved in these PIs have a middle-class background and form the backbone of citizenship and civil society.

A number of European countries have been particularly hit hard by the ongoing financial and economic crisis, linked to neo-liberal globalization policies. The effects on middle-class people are widespread. The middle class is becoming weaker, poorer and struggling to maintain its identity. In times of conditional employment and temporary work, upward social mobility becomes much more difficult. As the welfare state is hollowed out, growing inequalities and increasing cost burdens on private households exacerbate existing difficulties and increase
social conflicts. Together they put a question mark on the pattern of growth and development of “Western” societies. Should we abandon the achievements of modern welfare states, which have contributed significantly to the quality of life: education, health, administration and infrastructure services, which are attributes of successful development? What message does this send to other countries in the world?

5. Conclusion

With regards to the critical challenges facing the world today, the old and new middle classes can be seen as part of the problem as well as a part of possible solutions, but as a developmental actor they have remained relatively invisible in much of the scholarly and policy debate. With their increasing share in the world’s population and their increased significance in setting and implementing national development priorities, it seems obvious that new middle classes will have to be made part of the solution, like the so far partially successful middle class mobilization in rich countries has been essential in creating development as we know it. Finally, and most importantly, in our emerging polycentric world we cannot assume that heterogeneous groups within and between societies would share a common vision of what is responsible development. What we can and will do is to investigate how different groups in societies are conceptualizing responsible development, how they exercise their political engagement and how they might use their consumer behavior and political engagement to achieve societal objectives. So, as development scholars we need to better understand these complex behavioral patterns in order to devise more tailor-made polices to address the major challenges of poverty, inequality and sustainability.

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