

## Norwegian Research on Development: A Comment on Johan Helland's Article

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In an article in this issue of *Forum for Development Studies*, Johan Helland, senior researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, states that Norwegian development research has taken a step backwards. It is being stigmatised as 'second-rate' research within the Norwegian research community, he claims, and far too few resources are made available for it: 'Development research must be brought back into the research community,' he says emphatically. Helland has expressed the same opinion in a report commissioned by the Research Council of Norway (Helland, 2001).

One part of Helland's criticism concerns the limited resources that are made available for Norwegian research on development. Today almost all Norwegian research on poverty and development in Latin America, Africa and Asia is funded out of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' development aid budget. This is a travesty. I wholeheartedly agree with Helland on this score. In a rapidly globalising world, it is imperative that other Norwegian ministries realise their responsibility for funding and utilising research on agriculture, trade, industry, health, education, demography, the environment, and political institutions in poor countries and regions – in all parts of the world. Norway interacts politically, economically and culturally with developing countries in the east, west, north and south, and development aid is only a small part of that interaction. Interaction with other countries is not a prerogative of the Foreign Ministry. Interaction with developing countries is not a prerogative of NORAD. This must be reflected in research. An important aspect of the internationalisation of Norwegian research should be to address increasingly the problems that concern the greatest number of people. Norwegian research today is introverted, concentrates too much on Norway's own problems, and far too much on rich people's problems. In the health sector, this is called the 90/10 problem: 90 per cent of medical research concerns the problems of 10 per cent of humanity. This is not only a problem within medicine, but within other scholarly disciplines as well.

Realisation of the above was part of the rationale for the Research Council of Norway's research programme *Globalisation and*

*marginalisation: Multi- and interdisciplinary research on development paths in the South*, which was initiated in 1998 and is planned to continue through 2007. In the main years of the programme life span (2002–2005) its total budget is around 20 million NOK per year. The programme has been implemented on the basis of a programme plan developed by a committee led by Gunnar Sorbo, director of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (Research Council of Norway, 1998). The programme plan said little about ‘development research’, but instead proposed a research programme ‘directed towards some important features within international development’, and suggested a focus on ‘research on globalisation and on the consequences of globalisation within some key fields’ (p. 7). It provided an introduction on some key aspects of international development, and singled out the following areas of priority:

- ▼ globalisation and marginalisation (the overall perspective)
- ▼ poverty
- ▼ economic policy and commercial and industrial development
- ▼ political development; democracy, human rights and conflicts
- ▼ health, education and population growth
- ▼ environmental problems and resource management.

I chaired the programme committee from 1998 until May 2001. Professor Kjell Havnevik chaired the committee during the rest of 2001. For the period from 2002 onwards the Research Council will appoint a new programme committee to direct the programme’s further development.

An important premise for the research programme was a realisation that the term ‘South’ no longer made sense: for at least three reasons. First, formerly socialist countries in the north had become a substantial part of the global poverty problem. Second, some important developing countries in Asia had become rich. And third, the migration of poor people to rich countries had increased an already established poverty problem within some of the world’s richest countries.

The realisation that the term ‘South’ no longer made sense was reflected in the first part of the new research programme’s title: *Globalisation and marginalisation*. Problems related to development have to be understood in relation to global processes. However, in the second part of the title (*Development paths in the South*) the misleading concept of the ‘South’ prevailed. The reason for this was purely bureaucratic. Norway had developed a ‘South’ policy,

and the funding for the new research programme came uniquely from a part of the Foreign Ministry's budget that was defined by the concept of a 'South'. From the Research Council's viewpoint, it was not just dangerous but impossible to abandon the established terminology of the funder. This led to a decision to use *Development paths in the South* (Utviklingsveier i Sor) as the short form for the programme's title, rather than the more meaningful *Globalisation and marginalisation*.

A basic weakness of the *Development paths in the South* programme, which Helland calls 'the main programme for development research', is that virtually all its money comes from the MFA's development aid budget. Ideally, such a programme should pool resources from several ministries. This was part of the idea at the outset, and the Research Council has wanted to obtain funding from several ministries, and pool them together in a large programme. This has not happened so far, and is part of the reason why the budget remains too small. The division of Environment and development in the Research Council spends considerably more money on research related to the Norwegian environment than on development and environment in the rest of the world. On this point, again, I agree completely with Johan Helland. The applications evaluated by the programme committee for *Development paths in the South* have been of such high quality that we should ideally have funded at least twice as much research as we have been able to. And if the budget had been known to be significantly higher, this would have stimulated even better applications.

Another part of Helland's criticism may be understood as targeting the desire of the programme committee to reach out to researchers other than those who consider themselves 'development researchers'. In line with the programme plan, the programme committee has done little to promote the concept of a special kind of research called 'development research'. Instead it has tried to encourage new and broader perspectives by emphasising the basic dichotomy of globalisation and marginalisation, and by trying to attract the interest of a wide range of Norwegian researchers. This seemed entirely natural to me. As a historian I am deeply interested in questions related to social, economic, cultural and political development, but have never considered myself a 'development researcher'. As chair of the programme committee, I saw it as my task to try to engage the best qualified Norwegian scholars within and across academic disciplines in researching the interlinked processes of globalisation and marginalisation, and how they affect

poor countries and regions worldwide. I did not see it as my task to allocate money to a particular group calling themselves 'development researchers'. When I look at the research portfolio of the programme, I see that we have to some extent succeeded in broadening the base for Norwegian research on development. However, most of the output of course still remains to be seen, both in terms of publications, networking and recruitment. And it is a problem that a programme that was meant to be large, is large mainly in scope, not in financial terms.

Despite these limitations, *Development paths in the South* did provide funding in the years 1999–2001 to a number of research projects in such areas as poverty, economic globalisation, economic policy, commercial, agricultural and industrial development, health, education, the environment and resource management, political development, media, democracy, human rights, and conflicts. So many applications were received in time for the annual 15 June deadline in 1999, 2000 and 2001, that in 2001 the committee decided to allocate not only the 2002 budget, but the whole of the 2003 budget as well. There will therefore be no money to distribute in 2002, unless the Research Council of Norway manages to raise additional funding. As Helland says, this is deplorable.

Johan Helland wants to go back to the once influential government white paper 'On development research relating to developing countries' from 1987–88 (St.meld. nr. 42 (1987–88)), and takes up again the old discussion of how to define 'development research'. Here he and I part company again. In my view, the problem is not one of reaching a proper definition of 'development research' or of improving its academic respectability. I would have preferred to shorten the title of the 1987–88 white paper to 'On research relating to developing countries', and to encourage the best, most respected and most promising scholars to undertake such research.

A basic aim of Norwegian research policy should be to engage the country's leading scholars and most promising research recruits in addressing questions related to development among poor social groups and poor countries in all parts of the world. While academic excellence is certainly an essential goal, the main challenge is not to 'internationalise' Norwegian research in a way that allows Norwegians to compete with researchers of other rich nations in a kind of academic sports contest. The main challenge is to combine such excellence with relevance in order to understand and promote sustainable social, economic and cultural development among the poor.

If we can agree on the above, then it is probably a mistake to single out a special area called 'development research' or to encourage a group of scholars to define themselves as 'development researchers'. This is not, and should not be, an area with its own methodology, networks or exclusive funding programmes. As a subject, development is too broad and important to be isolated.

### References

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