

## Call for papers GAPSYM6

### *Africa: (post-)development?*

FRIDAY 7 DECEMBER 2012

For the past decades, the bottom ranks of international indices on human wellbeing and economic development have been almost exclusively reserved for sub-Saharan African countries. By these standards, Africa remains indeed the most disadvantaged continent in the current global constellation.

To lift Africa out of its 'underdeveloped' state, a whole range of paradigms and approaches have been developed and put in place, from the modernization model in the 50's to the current neo-liberal vision of development, spawning a full fledged aid-industry composed of a diverse range of international and African public and private actors.

Over the past years, an important shift seems to have taken place in the dominant paradigm: the move from a *development* discourse to a *poverty reduction* discourse. This shift is reflected in today's dominant approaches: from the PRSP's (poverty reduction strategy papers) to the more widely known MDGs (millennium development goals)

The MDGs have -at least on paper- become the blueprint for most aid interventions in Africa. They are hailed for their concrete, indicator-based approach that benefits planning and monitoring of interventions and increases accountability of donors and policymakers, for their multi-dimensional view on human wellbeing with a focus on social issues as health, education and gender, and also for their sensitizing and mobilizing potential to increase political action to end poverty.

But at the same time the MDG approach has been criticized for 'depoliticizing' development in favor of a more technical, donor driven agenda relying on results-based-management, with an emphasis of quantity over quality and, more fundamentally, neglecting complex structural causes of poverty, deprivation and inequality. What is more, they seem to have been misinterpreted as national targets instead of global targets, which has further reinforced the global perception of Africa hopelessly lagging behind. In particular, countries or areas with slow economic growth, limited economic opportunities, unequal asset ownership, economic dependency on small-scale agriculture, high food insecurity, and proneness to conflict score badly in MDG progress reports. Furthermore, globalization of world markets, increased energy prices and food price volatility make progress even more difficult to achieve in economic quantitative terms if local agriculture and industries are not (cap)able to compete.

A parallel evolution, complementing the focus on social sectors of the MDGs with a more outspoken economic approach, has been the increased focus on providing access to financial means as a quick fix for poverty. Making the poor 'bankable' through microfinance opportunities but also the provision of direct cash transfers have now become part of the poverty reduction toolbox in Africa.

During the past decade, both the concepts of development and poverty reduction seem to face – alleged? – competition from 'new challenges' such as climate change and ecological degradation. Climate change mitigation (addressing the causes of climate change) and adaptation (adjusting to the impacts of climate change) have rapidly become key issues in development policies.

Increasingly, the climate adaptation discourse addresses underlying social vulnerabilities instead of focusing only on climate impact responses. Enhancing societal resilience to shocks, and building adaptive capacity are seen as common objectives of development and climate adaptation. Yet the financial resources that will be made available for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and the

ethical and political discussions about the right to develop and the recognized need to respect the boundaries of climate stability, complicate the search for synergies between development and climate actions.

At the UN level, discussions on sustainable development goals (SDGs) as successor for the MDGs in the framework of the UN's Rio+20 Conference, can facilitate the search for common ground.

While in the last years a lively and provocative public debate on the appropriateness and effectiveness of *aid* to Africa has emerged, the discussion on the concept of development itself in relation to Africa has been somewhat less prolific, at least outside the academic world.

Although *ownership* and *participation* have become emblematic buzzwords of the aid industries' newspeak, concepts as development (and also human rights and good governance) seem still informed by universalist assumptions based on Western historic evolutions and values. Scholars have however pointed out that African societies have adapted and transformed these concepts, developed alternative or hybrid visions and versions of modernity, more entrenched in local cultural practices and values. The ways in which African societies are currently being organized, the ways in which states are operating, economies function and markets are being globalised, often seem almost an anti-thesis of Western standards of development and modernity. These 'alternative modernities' - as Africanists have described them- are reflected though alternative developments characterized by profound informalisation, parallel economies and hybrid forms of governance. It remains a serious challenge to adjust development initiatives to these African realities occurring along very different political economic and cultural standards and different notions as well as practices of development.

Not only economic and social development is at stake here, as the modernization paradigm was also applied to the development of African cities. Town planners have always presupposed that African cities would develop according to western standards, as a result of which the city planning was not adapted to the local context and the needs of the local population. In many African towns large-scale projects of urban development were implemented, while disregarding the fact that urban centres in Africa might have to serve different purposes. The United Nations agency UN-HABITAT is now trying to promote sustainable development by advising urban policy makers, but also in this regard it is appropriate to question what kind of development African cities need.

Africa researchers at Ghent University Association are constantly confronted with these questions regarding the role of Africa in the debate on development, and this from a wide range of different disciplines.

How relevant is an MDG-style approach in order to tackle poverty and development problems in Africa? Are quantitative socio-economic indicators justified and/or useful for indicating (the lack of) progress? What is the true role of social issues, such as human rights, health and education in the development of Africa? Is monetization of the poor making sense? How relevant are the current approaches of the development business in the light of the emerging challenge of adaption to and mitigation of climate change? Is the prevailing afro-pessimism justified? Are African societies, cities or communities undergoing development based on universalist claims or can we speak of alternative modernities?

By organizing an international conference around these themes, we hope to critically reflect on the concept of development in Africa, to consider alternatives to the current discourse on African development and thus to contribute to the scholarly and public debate.

We welcome contributions which address these issues from various disciplines and fields, such as anthropology, urban planning, economics, health studies, education, history, geography, sociology, sustainability science etc. from both theoretical as well as more practical perspectives.

## **Paper proposals**

Paper proposals (max. 300 words, in English or French) should be submitted before 1 August 2012 to the GAP secretariat ([Gap@UGent.be](mailto:Gap@UGent.be)), mentioning "GAPSYM6 – proposal". By 1 October the scientific committee will notify which papers have been accepted.

## **Poster presentations**

GAPSYM6 offers doctoral students and other researchers the opportunity to present their research projects by means of a poster. **Posters do NOT have to refer to the theme of the symposium.**

Through these poster presentations GAP seeks to give an overview of all current, Africa-related projects and doctoral research at the Ghent University Association. Researchers who would like to submit a poster should also send in an abstract of this poster (before 1 August 2012).

The posters (A0 format) should be delivered to the GAP secretariat (Dominique Godfroid, Ghent University – ICRH – K4 – 6th Floor – De Pintelaan 185 – 9000 Gent), by Monday, 26 November 2012.

## **Publication**

The 2013 autumn edition of our international and double-blind peer-reviewed journal Afrika Focus will largely be devoted to the theme of GAPSYM6. Regular speakers as well as guest speakers are invited to submit their papers for publication in this special issue of Afrika Focus. The deadline for submitting the manuscript is 20 December 2012. If, after peer-review, the paper is accepted, it will be published by December 2013. For submission guidelines, see [www.afrikafocus.eu](http://www.afrikafocus.eu).

## **Keynote speakers/panellists**

Raymond Bush (School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK)

Miriam Were (National AIDS Control Council (NACC) Kenya)

Tanya Cox (Beyond2015 campaign) – to be confirmed

Veronique Jacobs (World Bank, Belgium) – to be confirmed

Joseph Vyankandondera (Ghent University) – to be confirmed

## **Scientific Committee — GAPSYM6**

Koenraad Bogaert, Kristien Michiels, Tomas Van Acker, Karen Buscher, Gillian Mathys, Jean Hugé, Patrick Van Damme, Annelies Verdoolaege.

## **GAP secretariat**

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