

Kelly Si Miao Liang

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CanDo: what *can* it do?

Development, geography, and making effective changes in a world of unevenness

Introduction

I was introduced to CanDo earlier this year through a presentation by the director at Hitotsubashi University, where I was an exchange student. During my year at Hitotsubashi University I sat through presentations of more than a dozen of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Japan. Among them, CanDo stands out for its reluctance to address politically controversial issues. A self-acclaimed development NGO, CanDo states that it “operates to assist development in the fields of education, healthcare and environmental conservation, which are fundamental to livelihoods” (CanDo, index). This statement translates into the construction of classrooms, provision of school materials such as textbooks, desks and chairs, free learning sessions on safe sex, HIV/AIDS and maternal health in Mwingi in the Eastern Province of Kenya. It is difficult to argue against the statement, since education, physical health and environmental sustainability are some of the clichés in third-world development. One of the most influential development institutions, the United Nations Development Program, even enshrines them in the Millennium Development Goals (goal 2, 5 and 6), which both the Japanese and Kenyan government have agreed to implement (United Nations). Nevertheless, a series of fundamental questions remain untouched regarding CanDo’s work in Kenya and its effectiveness. What kind of development is the organisation assisting? Is it sufficient to address only the unevenness produced by development, instead of tackling systematic inequalities? How does CanDo represent the local Kenyans in Mwingi? Is the organisation participatory? Is CanDo sensitised to variegated geographies and geographical interactions taking place within the region and between the region and the rest of the world? With these guiding questions, I will try to assess CanDo’s work using some of the arguments development geographers have put forward. By doing so, I wish to offer CanDo new ways to engage with its Kenyan community partners and position itself to pursue more socially, economically, institutionally and geographically meaningful

ways to make effective changes.

Ambiguities in CanDo's development

Central to CanDo's development ideology is "*yutaka-sa* defined by the locals" (CanDo, who is CanDo). In other words, the kind of development CanDo aims to promote can be measured in *yutaka-sa*. For the purpose of the paper, I will translate *yutaka-sa* as abundance. However, abundance does not capture all the meanings of this ambiguous Japanese word. *Yutaka-sa* encompasses two different and arguably contradictory concepts: economic growth, the essential component to all developmental projects which can be measured in the number of possessions, and emotional satisfaction, the less usual component which is immeasurable but often associated with trust, social bonds, cultural diversity and spiritual freedom. This is different to Lawson's interpretation of development with the binary of *more vs. enough* because *yutaka-sa* does not purely refer to material outcomes of development (Lawson 2007). It is hard to attribute CanDo's development ideology to one single camp of development theory. One can argue since that CanDo's describes its main objective as to eradicate poverty and pursue economic advancement, this reflects mainstream development thoughts. Meanwhile, CanDo's work in education for children and women can be seen as stemming from the Marxist-feminist traditions. Questioning social and economical exclusions through the lenses of class and gender, Marxist-feminist development theories attend to the structural unevenness of capitalist accumulation, by which development is often measured (Lawson 2007). To a certain extent, the two different meanings of abundance even mirror some of the most seductive promises of neoliberalism, notably the peculiar marriage of economic growth and liberation of the individual put forward repeatedly by the most prominent orators (Tickell and Peck, 2003). Even though the task is to fit CanDo's development ideology into a cell of a complicated matrix of development schools, the vagueness embedded in its notion of abundance remain a drawback and obstacle to the work of the NGO. The almost instinctive desires to address the limitations, exclusions and structural inequities created and reproduced by development is not compatible with acceleration of such process. Without recognising the long-standing and omnipresent colonial patterns of development, CanDo, or any development NGO, might see its attempts be counter-effective and end up reinforcing the spatial and social inequalities it has vowed to combat. In the next section I will make visible of the colonial/imperial patterns of economic development by briefly examining the origins and underlying assumptions of development in its modern and mainstream sense.

A siren's song

Too often development has been depicted as a natural, universal and inevitable process. When development discourse was first consolidated in the early nineteenth century, W. W. Rostow, regarded

by many as the founding father of development thinking, conceptualised development as a linear trajectory with different stages from pre-modern to take-off and eventually to the final stage of modernity (Lawson 2007, 72-73). Modernisation theory dominated international development for decades following WWII, and multiple “development decades” were launched by development agencies such as the United Nations and World Bank. Despite all the efforts, very few countries in the newly decolonised world have seen the promising effects advocated by development. In the early 1970’s, strands of anti-Enlightenment thoughts were consolidated simultaneously in the third world, notably in Latin America and Africa, to explain the frustrating experiences that former colonised nations had with development (Sheppard et al 2009, 86-87). The keys reside in, according to Frank and other *dependentistas*, the imperial and colonial nature of development (Galeano 1997).

Building on the dependency theory, Marxist-feminist and post-structural scholars have sought to shed light on the relationships between imperialism/colonialism and development. Wainwright argues for what he terms “capitalism qua development” – development that is supplementary to capitalism and imposes imperially “Western modes of economy, spatiality, and being” (Wainwright 2008, 13). As Gilmartin (2008) has demonstrated, historically, capitalism has evolved with different tides of European colonial expansion benefiting the elite minority in metropolitan centres. The colonies therefore performed the role of material and spatial “fixes” to different modes of Western capitalism. These fixes have taken various forms under distinct historical conditions such as cheap sources of energy, raw materials and manpower, impunity to legal obligations and environmental responsibilities, as well as markets to consume ever expanding production of goods and services (Harvey 2006). In other words, capitalism works through uneven geography, natural and/or manifested via colonisation, to reinforce and (re)produce power relations between the privileged and exploited, producing variegated spatial results (Harvey 2006). Given the structural inequalities and imperial/colonial ideologies of capitalism qua development, it is not hard to explain why post-WWII development, either Keynesian-modernist or subsequent neoliberal, did not yield universally satisfactory outcomes. It is not because previously colonised countries did not fully committed to development and thus are *undeveloped* now. Rather, as Ferguson puts it, the “developing” world is actually developed and at modernity; it looks different from the “developed” world because development is designed to privilege the few while dispossessing the many (Ferguson 2006, 25).

Nevertheless, development is like a siren’s song. Despite its colonial nature, spatial insensitiveness and many other limitations, we cannot *not* want development (Wainwright 2008, 10). It does not matter if abundance in the economic sense is defined by the local villagers of Mwingi, or some development experts based in Tokyo; development is inevitably entangled with capitalism and colonial/imperial ideologies. The impoverishment in the Mwingi region, Kenya, is a multi-layered outcome of a long history of colonial exploitation, modernisation and neoliberal development. Development itself cannot and is not designed to reverse the uneven patterns produced by capitalism for the two form an *aporia* and work

hand in hand with one another (see Lawson 2007, Sheppard 2002, Wainwright 2008 and Sheppard et al 2009). Put simply, development in its conventional sense is highly toxic. Giving the locals the freedom to decide what kind of development they wish to have and be assisted by CanDo is not a panacea to solve the “poverty” problem in the region. This is to romanticise the locals as an uncontaminated source of wisdom which can function perfectly within and repel all structural inequalities of the global capitalist system. According to Wainwright, romanticising the indigenous is as imperial as colonising and dehumanising them (Wainwright 2008, 91). I acknowledge CanDo’s respect to local villagers and zest to promote endogenous development. Without scrutinising development from a historical perspective and constantly engaging in reconceptualising and reconfiguring the work at hand, CanDo can do little to improve the living conditions other than accelerating capitalism qua development.

Education as a double-edged sword

In one of its newsletter, CanDo states that the organisation works to empower its community partners through education and healthcare seminars. Though these are referred to by economists as unproductive services and therefore not directly connected to capitalist accumulation, these services can equip the villagers in the long run with tools to diagnose and understand the problems barring the region from prosperity (CanDo, newsletter issue 7). This is an attempt to foster endogenous development. That is, CanDo is trying to restore the villagers’ rights to speak for themselves and be the agents of the changes they wish to see instead of confining these rights to a handful of Northern development experts. Though the organisation does not specify it, CanDo education support program has its ideological roots in postcolonialism, which I will explain in what follows.

Lawson (2007) argues that big “D” Development, the interventionist project or the intent to develop, emerged during the decolonisation rush in the 1960’s to perpetuate the expertise of first-world governments and development institutions over the newly established third-world nations. A discourse legitimising and institutionalising western superiority was consolidated to pave the way for big “D” Development practices. In this discourse, the capitalist development model of the West was taken out of its historic, social and spatial contexts and legitimised as universal and therefore can be emulated all around the world. Development discourse is anything but new. In fact, it is an extension and adaptation from the imperial/colonial discourse. Spectacularly deconstructing this in his writings on Orientalism, Said points out that in imperial/colonial discourse the Orient was imagined and created as a racial, cultural and geographical “other” to the Occident, which enabled the Occident to define itself (Gregory et al 2009, 513). Latent inferiority was soon applied to perceived differences of the created “other,” and expressed with terms like “civilisation” and “technology” (Said 2007, 48). Although Orientalism was about the Orient and its people, inhabitants of the Orient were never given the right to portray and speak of themselves.

They were nothing more than objects of knowing and this knowledge was produced by experts of the imagined and racialised “other,” the Orientalists. Similarly, Wainwright (2008) shows us how European colonists have built a discourse on Maya qua ethnos as a “fallen people” who “destroy their own essence” to solicit colonial expansion in Belize to give the Maya civilisation. In other words, trusteeship was needed to save the inferior and uncivilised “other”. Expertise in the project of big “D” development is the modern version of colonial trusteeship. Both expertise and trusteeship seek to give authority to the west over perceived problems in lands of the imagined and racialised “other,” while denying the locals a right to solve the problems themselves. Even the problems are also constructed very similarly in imperial/colonial and development discourse: poverty in development is something that is a “natural” phenomenon in the same way primitiveness was in colonisation. Progress to alleviate these problems can be made with the know-how from the experts/trustees who, even though they are involved in the creation of the problems, have taken up the “White Man’s burden” to bring wealth/civilisation (Bonnett 2008). Postcolonialism derives from the struggles against imperial/colonial and development discourses and practices which constitute the Eurocentric humanity on the imagined and created “other” (Mbembe 2008). In her classical piece *Can the subaltern speak*, Spivak coined down the term “epistemic violence” to refer to the violent denial and rejection of the ways of understanding of non-western indigenous peoples (Sharp 1999). It is this epistemic violence exercised by the west against the rest that has silenced the latter for centuries and give the former the authority to *speak for* and the power to *save* the latter (Hall 2007).

This brings me back to CanDo’s work in education. If we hold true Foucault’s conceptualisation of power and knowledge as interdependent and mutually constitutive, at first glance, we might say education spreads knowledge and therefore empowers people to speak for and save themselves *vis-à-vis* so-called experts. When indigenous people are able to represent themselves and establish social relations based on the meanings they produce, the Eurocentric asymmetrical relationship between the west and rest will be gradually corrected and epistemic violence slowly fades away. However, Spivak cautions us that epistemic violence does not cease to function when the subaltern are given the right to participate in shaping a discourse. Rather, epistemic violence looks at the failure to incorporate the ways the subaltern perceive and represent the world into the power geometry of knowledge production (Sharp 1999, Wainwright 2007, Painter and Jeffery 2009). In order to be heard and taken seriously, the subaltern must “adopt western thought, reasoning and language,” even though reason is at very heart of western superiority and universalism – the isms that have subjugated and marginalised the subaltern over centuries (Sharp 1999, 111). This is why I regard education as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it challenges the “experts” because the unskilled and uneducated can gain some control and expertise over development through education. On the other hand, education based on western thoughts, humanities, science and language requires its students to denounce traditional indigenous ways of knowing and mimic those of their former colonial masters. Through his analysis on French colonisation in Algeria, Fanon argues the racialised “other” can never fully copy the values of the colonisers through education or other social interactions.

He further warns us that the “recognition of the perpetual gap between [the subaltern] and the ‘the real thing’ will ensure their subjection” (Sharp 1999, 123). There is no guarantee that education using old textbooks donated and recycled from the North will not make the subaltern believe what the development experts believe and despise their own ways of knowing.

Despite all the imperfections, I have tremendous faith in education and the schooling system in general. Just like there are materials that indoctrinate the minds of the subaltern, there are also alternative materials criticising the indoctrination and offering ways out of it. Education is one of the most direct and cost-effective ways to access this critical scholarship. Therefore I think CanDo’s work in providing educational services is an excellent starting point. What the organisation needs to do is transcend its current role as an accelerator of conventional education. It has to question the contents of education and try to foster preservation and proliferation of indigenous ways of knowing and representing the people and the world. Recognising the inherent epistemic violence hidden in conventional education materials and struggling against it to liberalise the subjugated can help the organisation to achieve the second component of CanDo’s development ideology – the abundance of mind, identity and culture.

Addressing the broader picture

As a student of geography, I am sensitised to spatial dimensions of development through my last few years of academic training. CanDo’s work in Mwingi is a geographically attuned project and addresses the uneven geography produced by capitalism qua development. The organisation too recognises the spatiality of its work. CanDo explains that it chose this location is because “Mwingi is one of the most lagging regions in Kenya” and “suffers from outward migration of labour to urban Nairobi” (CanDo, newsletter issue 1). In doing so it hints at the uneven spatial patterns associated with capitalism qua development that mainstream development theorists have long overlooked.

Influenced by the Enlightenment, classical economic geographies treated space as uniform isotropic plane. When economic landscape is at equilibrium, the effect of development, or the immanent development of capitalist accumulation, will distribute evenly across space and people’s living conditions will eventually converge (Lawson 2007, 93). This is at the root of spatial separatism which assumes “space has independent effects that can be isolated and manipulated to reach policy goals” (ibid 97). This view of space still carries weight today as contemporary academics and journalists continue to publish works articulating the “flatness” of the world. However, Marxist-feminist and subsequent post-structural geographers have taken a more sceptical stance on the spatiality of development. Building on the work of *dependentistas*, critical geographers question the homogeneity of capitalism qua development and call for the need to look at the variegated modes of capitalist accumulation and put them into geographical and social contexts (Gregory et al 2009, 781). Not only does capitalism qua development function

differently in the metropolitan core and periphery, it takes highly heterogeneous and interdependent forms within both regions denoted in this binary. Harvey goes a step further to argue that the very survival of capitalism depends on uneven geographies (Harvey 2007). Space acts like “fixes” implementing, sustaining and diffusing capitalism under the name of development (Lawson 2007, 138). Critical literature of uneven geography such as Harvey’s has had impacts on development discourse and the ways some of the most prominent development agencies present their works. The World Bank, one of the Washington Consensus institutions, titled its *World Development Report 2009 “Reshaping Economic Geography”* and states that “the world is *not* flat” (World Bank Group 2008, 2). In the Bank’s skewed understanding of economic geography, or geography Chicago style, spatial unevenness is an inevitable natural phenomenon *vis-à-vis* the outcome of capitalist development. Variegated geographic and economic conditions should *not* be seen as a problem waiting to be overcome and equalised; instead of developing the lagging regions, governmental bodies should ensure equal accesses of these lagging regions to growing poles through provision and upgrading of infrastructures. In other words, the ultimate fix to the uneven spatiality of development according to the Bank’s development “experts” is to accelerate capitalist process by posing minimalist interventions to the market.

In the World Bank’s logic, CanDo’s geographically sensitised projects in Mwingi to “empower the locals, enhance social capitals of trust and consolidate competitive regionality” (CanDo, newsletter issue 46) are insignificant and unnecessary because by doing so CanDo distorts the equilibrium of the market, which is the ultimate panacea to uneven geographic development according to the Bank’s economists. I disagree with the Bank because it is falling into spatial fetishism assuming that “spatial structure [... is] the cause of a process” (Lawson 2007, 97). That is almost the same as saying that territorial binaries like “failed” vs. “successful” places, “core” vs. “periphery,” “West” vs. “East” and etc are of natural construction and caused capitalism qua development. There is some truth to this assumption, as endowment of natural resources, proximity to major trade routes and other natural geographical characteristics do impact a place’s development. Nevertheless, the spatial fetishist motif behind mainstream development institutions’ take on economic geography does not only overlook the inherent uneven and monopolistic characteristics of capitalism (see Shepherd et al 2009) but also fails to recognise the fluidity of space and relative and relational relationships between places that critical geographers have put forward for many decades (see Harvey 2007 and Shepherd 2002). To quote Lawson (2007), space/place is “socially produced and producing.” She argued for the importance of “deconstruct[ing] mainstream development discourse by locating and ‘provincialising’ the West” with its colonial and imperial histories that cannot be emulated universally in global South (185). Therefore, it is extremely important for development agencies to situate their works at hand within a broader picture of places, space and networks. This is why I understand CanDo’s attempt to enrich the labour, social and cultural foundations of the Mwingi region as a spatially sensitive project which aims to socially re-configure the place.

There is always a danger of seeing space as a container of social activities. In CanDo's case, issues like poverty, unemployment and underemployment, environmental degradation and lack of civil services such as education, healthcare are perceived as internal conditions within Mwingi which define the region as "lagging." By interpreting geography with postcolonial theories, Wainwright (2008) demonstrates how places are formed through territorialisation – a process through which representations are naturalised and become fixed to a place. The so-called "world cities" do not encompass the world per se; instead it is their economic, political, social and cultural ties to the rest of world or their "spaces of flows" that make cities like New York, Tokyo or even Nairobi "global." By the same token, Mwingi's "lagging-ness" should be considered in term of its positionality – how it is connected to other places in an uneven spatial network (Shepherd 2002). Provision of education alone can solve neither the chronic impoverishment nor the high unemployment rate experienced by the residents of Mwingi. These issues of the region should be understood in connection with Nairobi, where factors like growing foreign direct investments (FDIs) and expanding informal sector make it a "stickier" place for capital and workers. Without addressing chronic unemployment from economic and political perspectives, education will further increase emigration flows from Mwingi to the slums of Nairobi since it is natural for workers to want to find jobs in urban Nairobi that allow them to utilise their learnt skills rather than stay in rural Nairobi and be underemployed or not employed at all. Therefore, it is important for CanDo to reconceptualise Mwingi as a nodal point in a complicated and highly uneven network of places, and what is going on in Mwingi is ultimately linked to changes unfolding elsewhere. In other words, the success and achievement of CanDo is largely determined by how the organisation addresses the broader picture. As for now, there is much to be improved.

Situating knowledge without binaries

Positionality does not stop at the global, supra-national, national, regional or municipal. It extends to scales like organisation, household, individual and the body (Gregory et al 2009, 556). CanDo also needs to be aware of the danger of representing the organisation and its staff and its community partners with simplistic binaries without situating itself within power geometry of knowledge production and development. From the time CanDo was founded, the organisation has been situating itself with binaries with statements like "We will always remember that we are outsiders who are here to help" (CanDo newsletter issue 3) and "We will always keep in mind that we are in a position of helpers who are from elsewhere" (CanDo, who is CanDo). These are only some examples of how the organisation places itself using terminology such as "locals vs. outsiders" and "victims vs. helpers." To tie the arguments I made above, binaries are epistemic foundations of imperial/colonial thinking because they allowing a group to establish and consolidate its identity in contrast to an imagined social, economic and/or geographical "other." Such a process gives the group who is self-defining and defining "other" the power to constitute

knowledge based on its own standard, or to play the “god-trick” – taking things out of their historical and geographical contexts and announcing them as universal (Hannah 2005). This is why development has become synonymous with Westernisation, modernisation, proliferation of capitalism, neoliberalism and globalisation. Of course, how I explain these concepts is undeniably over-simplified. However, it is hard to deny that the fact CanDo calls itself a collection of “outsiders” also cartoonises the complicated and intertwined world. As Radcliffe (2005) points out, postcolonial theorists iterate the importance of seeing the fluidity and messiness of binaries, and situate us in a web of uneven, interlinked and mutually constitutive realities. Put differently, we need to place ourselves in economic, social, ethnical, gender and geographical context and “non-innocent conversations” within others. Only by identifying and accepting the differences without binaries can we move forward to dismantle the colonial patterns of development (Power 2006). For CanDo, this means CanDo needs to recognise that under-development in Mwingi, Kenya is mutually constitutive with over-development in Tokyo, Japan. Not only is CanDo not a third-party organisation, or “outsiders,” who have nothing to do with the problems the people in Mwingi are facing; to an extent the staff and donors of CanDo are the cause and at the same time the victims of these problems. In other words, the problems CanDo is addressing through its work in Kenya are not just “their” problems. Lawson (2007, 46) shows us that it is unethical to focus on issues such as “poverty,” “unemployment,” “lack of education and health care” and “hunger,” for doing so allows “those in the West to elide responsibility for changing *our* practices.” In this sense, CanDo should radicalise its approach to development by re-position the organisation as part of the “local,” and start to explain to its donors and supporters the intertwined-ness of underdevelopment and overdevelopment. Besides mitigating the effects of impoverishment, development non-profit non-governmental organisations also have the duty to educate the general public for what they are doing is to go “there” to help “here”. What CanDo *can* do and *should* do is not just help “them,” local villagers in Mwingi, out of poverty but also help “us,” citizens of the world’s second largest economy, to understand “their” miseries and “our” wealth are mutually-constitutive.

Conclusion

Assessing CanDo’s work with some of the theories critical development scholars have put forward helps us understand how easy it is for an NGO to fall into colonial patterns of capitalism qua development and reinforce the uneven development it wishes to eliminate. There are places where CanDo does well, but there is always room for improvement. I hope I have made it clear throughout the paper that my intention is to shed light to some of the constructive alternative approaches which the organisation might consider adopting.

Since CanDo is a NGO from the global North working on development in the South, it needs to define what kind development it wishes to accomplish instead of making this vague by using the term *yutaka-sa* or abundance. An ideological basis always matters, because it will offer an overall framework through which CanDo's engagement with local Kenyans in Mwingi is determined. Beyond the realm of theories, how CanDo approaches development has implications for its work in the provision of education and health services. Using education as an example, I argue that the organisation needs to look beyond its role in simply building classrooms and providing necessary learning equipments to question the capacity of the current education system to emancipate its students from omnipresent colonial legacies. From a geographer's perspective, I acknowledge CanDo's efforts to address the uneven geographies produced by capitalism qua development in spite of the tendency of mainstream development discourse to treat this unevenness as a temporal, if not natural, phenomenon. To enrich its geographical sensitivity, I suggest CanDo tap into the recent and fruitful literature of positionality at various scales. Besides situating its work on global, national, regional and municipal scales, CanDo can take it a step further to drastically rework its self-representation from "outsiders" to "partners".

This seems a lot to ask of a NGO which is running on a relative small budget and few staff. However, CanDo does not have to do everything on its own. There are NGOs who are working on some similar themes around the world, and many are based in Kenya. The urgent and effective task for CanDo is to establish new institutional linkages with other development NGOs working in the region other than fellow Japanese organisations. I believe enriching the network between non-governmental non-profit organisations is one of the keys for achieving the third kind of development Bebbington (2004, 741) argues – development that aims to “reverse patterns of unevenness and inequality” caused by development as intervention and capitalist accumulation. Solidarity between NGO's is as equally important as that between NGO's and their community partners. Only with both kind of solidarity we have a larger chance of finding a way to reverse colonial legacies and uneven geographies of development.

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