

Anne McLennan
is an Associate
Professor and Research
Director at the Wits
University Graduate
School of Public
and Development
Management.



SOUTH AFRICA
DEVELOPMENT
PERSPECTIVE IN
QUESTION'
By Leslie Dikeni
ISBN: 978 0 9869968 6 3
Publisher: Real African
Publishers, 2012

BOOK REVIEW

South African Development Perspectives in Question by Leslie Mxolisi Dikeni

Leslie Mxolisi Dikeni, a Senior Researcher at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), has written a thought-provoking book titled South Africa Development Perspectives in Question. The book challenges the current orthodoxy on social development and the Developmental State, by proposing a different theoretical and methodological approach using an actor oriented mode of analysis.

After mapping out the theory and methodology in the initial chapters, this analysis is applied to three case studies: the Bethelsdorp Development Trust in Eastern Cape, St. Lucia in KwaZulu Natal and Schmidtsdrift in Northern Cape. Each case study examines different aspects of an actor oriented approach to social development and offers new insight into development practices at the interface between the state and civil society. (A comprehensive conclusion pulling together the 'lessons' which emerge from this analysis would have provided additional understanding.)

The argument being made is that current perspectives on development, evident in the discourse on the Developmental State and in approaches to development espoused by key actors in society, ignore the role of actors in development, particularly at the social interface. It is these interactions and negotiations that define the development process, rather than the often careful, but limited, linear analyses and plans that are the common tools of the development trade.

Leslie Dikeni challenges a mechanical exploration of the interface between policy, planning, implementation and outcomes, in favour of a contextual analysis that is premised on understanding historical and current actor engagement and local knowledge. These intersections play out in different ways in the different cases presented. For example, the case of the Bethelsdorp Development Trust should show how these interactions can undermine the planned development process despite good intentions, as people's lived realities, knowledge and ideologies shape and reshape the implementation of projects.

The overall message is both sober, in light of the recent Vision 2030 planning process, and optimistic. Sober because he warns against simplistic assumptions of linear cause and effect relationships between comprehensive planning and development outcomes. This is the danger that lurks in the attempts to implement Vision 2030 without due consideration of the historical and current interactions between actors in a development space.

Optimistic because embedded in the careful and contextual analysis of the cases are useful insights and possible practices that speak to an emerging practice based on the lived realities, knowledge and institutions of the key players – state, community, business and individuals. The St Lucia case shows, for example, the importance of local planning based on an understanding of state intervention as a socially constructed, negotiated process. There is no room for big policy statements or national directives. Similarly, Schmidtsdrift shows that planned interventions have to acknowledge the roles of all the actors and the changes that may emerge from their interaction.

The book is an interesting amalgam of theoretical and methodological innovation and in-depth case analysis. As such it is a fascinating read. It would, as suggested earlier, benefit from a conventional conclusion pulling together some of the strands as foot prints to follow into the future. At the same time, I found myself wanting more information from the cases, while understanding the constraints of space. Sometimes the case is stated rather than demonstrated because the complex detail is missing. Nonetheless, the arguments made are challenging and pertinent in our current context as we attempt to embark as a country, a state, a society, a community and individuals on a new development path. On this journey, questioning development perspectives, and being aware of the role of social actors in redefining development practice, are necessary tools. This book provides them – read it!