

## Revisiting how knowledge economy of the centre sustains rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa

*Matunhu, J*

*Department of Development Studies  
Midlands State University  
Gweru, Zimbabwe*

### **Abstract**

Rural areas in Africa carry over 60 percent of the population in the continent. Yet they are the poorest parts of the world. Since a while now, the United Nations, governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals have been grappling with the problem of rural underdevelopment in Africa. Conventions have been signed; strategic plans have been adopted and set in motion and donations have been channeled to Africa to alleviate the plight of rural communities. Despite all the effort, rural poverty and underdevelopment continue to disfigure the continent, albeit some improvement. Why is it taking so long to heave the rural communities out of poverty and underdevelopment? The theoretical discourse claims that the problem lies in the differences in the knowledge economies of the affluent communities (the centre) and the poor and sometimes desperate rural communities (periphery). The discourse concludes that merging the traditional knowledge economies of Africa and that of the West is what would sustain rural development in the continent.

*Key Terms:* Africa, Poverty and Underdevelopment, Center-periphery, Knowledge Economy

### **Introduction**

Rural poverty and underdevelopment; defaces Africa. Pillay (2000) and Mbaku (1998) attribute the problem to corruption, which by its very nature diverts resources away from their intended developmental projects. Rodney (1972) has attributed the problem to the imperialistic behaviour of the West, which has created and sustained unfair trade between the richer parts of the world and the poorer communities. Imperialism allowed underpriced resources to flow out of Africa while overpriced goods and services were sold to the continent. Yet, Stewart (2004) apportions the blame to political conflict in the continent. Notwithstanding the above contributions to the debate on causes of rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa, the current discourse blames the poverty and underdevelopment on the

impoverishing relationship between the knowledge economy of the elite and that of the poorer rural communities. This subtle reality is far from the picture imagined in mainstream development economics, where poverty and underdevelopment are seen as a direct result of poor people's failure to modernize. The discourse builds on the trajectory by Chambers (1983), Samir, Chitala and Mandaza (1987), Rodney (1972), Swanson (1980), and Robb (2002). The analysis uses the terms knowledge system and knowledge economy interchangeably. There is no fundamental difference between the two concepts.

### **Conceptualising poverty and underdevelopment**

Poverty and underdevelopment refers to deprivation of human needs and wants. There is no consensus on how it is measured. The US dollar is commonly used to distinguish extreme poverty from abject poverty. The measure is not without challenges. It is based on income poverty. Yet not all rural communities in Africa survive on wages. During the 2008 to 2009 economic recession in Zimbabwe, most rural communities survived on battering. The US dollar measure of poverty and underdevelopment cannot measure other forms of poverty such as political deprivation, subjugation of the values system and culture of the rural poor people. Several other challenges are faced in dealing with the concept of poverty and underdevelopment. For instance, whose definition of poverty and underdevelopment should the rural communities adopt? If we adopt that of the West, then it is not surprising that poor communities look up to the knowledge economy of the West to help us to ascend out of the problem. The current discourse conceptualizes rural underdevelopment as a community's inability to meet its basic requirements such as food, water, shelter, education, health, safety, and communication infrastructure.

The challenge with the deprivation is that it is anti-developmental. It robs the rural sector of the human health and energy required to initiate and sustain rural development. Society's lack of understanding of the dichotomy between the rural knowledge systems and that of the West affects our ability to eradicate the rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Seemingly the major goal of the dominant knowledge economy is improving the environment in Africa for capital accumulation. Any improvement in the lives of poor people in rural Africa is incidental. According to the World Bank Report (1996i:15), "poverty reduction is rarely a central or motivating theme for the business plan or country assistance strategies . . ." Instead, poverty and underdevelopment reduction is incidental to macro-economic stability. The discourse regards knowledge economy as a body of experiences and competencies that reside in a community. Knowledge economy defines a people's culture and identity. Some communities in Africa have lost their identities in preference of Western ideologies, which the extremist Muslim religion regards as bankrupt ideologies. The extremist Islamic struggles against America and its allies are based on a need to preserve

a people's identity as depicted in the Koran. From a eurocentric position, knowledge economy can be used to judge a community's level of development. According to modernity theorists, some knowledge systems or economies are too traditional to the extent that they inhibit poverty reduction and development – a view that is opposed by dependency theorists such as Rodney (1972) and Samir, Chitala and Mandaza (1987).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the production is the centre-periphery theory. The theory is structural in that it admits that society is divided into two classes - the dominant class and the dominated class. It describes the former class as not poor, powerful and resourced. On the periphery, the theory locates the poor communities, whose knowledge economy is considered unsophisticated, backward and easy to exploit for the economic and political development of the centre. The centre lacks a strong strategic vision on poverty and underdevelopment reduction and clear monitorable actions for reducing poverty and underdevelopment. The World Bank (1996i:15) outlines the sources of such a problem as, "this shortcoming at the operation level is often rooted in: a lack of information on poverty and underdevelopment, inadequate analysis, and the centre's disinterest toward rural poverty and underdevelopment reduction. According to Rodney (1972), and Samir, Chitala and Mandaza (1987), Africa's rural poverty and underdevelopment is a result of the exploitative behavior of the developed world. The hegemonic centre believes that modernizing the knowledge economy of the periphery is what would bring about development in the rural areas. The centre tasks itself with the responsibility of using its privileged body of knowledge to deal with the poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas. The theory fails to recognize that the contemporary world is not so simple. There is a need to locate the locus of control in the centre. Leaders of giant transnational corporations (TNCs) such as Anglo American, Rio Tinto, Lonrho, IMF, World Bank and their governments in the North form the centre of the knowledge economy. The centre is composed of the most powerful institutions and individuals. These make decisions on behalf of the poor.

Notably, population increases away from the centre and affluence reduces in the same direction. Conversely, poverty and underdevelopment diminishes towards the centre. In terms of power and authority, Presidents Obama and Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron are influential world leaders. They have a say in what happens in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, the DRC, and many other parts of the world. Recently the trio Sarkorzy, Obama and Cameron with the help of NATO achieved regime change in Libya under the UN Resolution 1973.

The relationship between the centre and the political administrations in Africa is complex. The centre, especially the giant TNCs routinely bargain with governments

for measures that enable them to increase their profits and power over the poorer communities. The measures include the introduction and maintenance of favourable investment subsidies, infrastructural support, employment legislation and tax regimes. According to Crowling and Sudgen (1994), large TNCs with the backing from their political administrations divide and rule the African economies by reminding them that they can relocate and produce economic goods services from other parts of the continent or world. Governments and rural communities in Africa are forced to compete against each other under threat of losing a transnational's investment. The capital of the centre jumps on and off the economic boat as they see fit; they are likely to come back when they think that the situation in the poor countries is amenable to their interests. On the political landscape, it is doubtful if the regime change agendas in Libya, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Egypt and Tunisia have been initiated by the people of these countries. Chances are high that the agendas could have been initiated and sponsored by the giant TNCs through their political leadership in Europe and the USA.

The centre of the dominant knowledge economy is composed of people concerned with rural poverty and underdevelopment who are themselves neither rural nor poor. At international level, the UN, UNICEF and such bodies corporate are headquartered away from the poor rural communities. Although some of the rich people might be sharing the physical space with the poor, their perception of rural poverty and underdevelopment is much different from that of the poorer people. In some cases the not poor people in rural areas are those who are the link persons of the centre. Such individuals include non-governmental organization (NGOs) and embassies of the West. These are posted to the rural areas on line of duty. The centre regards its knowledge economy to be superior to that of the subordinating economies. Yet Chambers (1983) argues that the faculties which used to maintain, extend and correct the rural people's knowledge is strong. The knowledge faculties include acute observation, good memory for detail and transmission through teaching, apprenticeship, and storytelling. These faculties are necessary because of a high wastage and replacement rate in the knowledge economy. Much of the information of the poor is embedded in their tales and practices. Agreeably, the knowledge economy of the poor is vulnerable to wastage. For instance, the knowledge can be lost through death.

During the historic times, Africans were knowledge creators. They discovered methods of keeping records; they painted rocks with indeminable paint and they kept a record of animals they hunted. Much of the knowledge about animal behaviours among the rural people in Africa is based on direct observation and respect for evidence. According to Blurton and Melton (1976), the rural African people distinguished sharply between hearsay and direct observation; for instance, the observational methods of the San people resemble those of modern day western scientists. The San are also quite acute in attention to detail, in distinguishing data

from hearsay, and in general freedom from inference. According to Swanson (1980), the rural poor's observations are superior to those of naturalists such as Gilbert White and Aristotle, and very sophisticated indeed when compared with the legions of animal behaviourists among western hunters, game keepers and pet owners. The superior research methodology of the poor people could be a result of the fact that those who leave in hostile conditions cannot afford inaccurate observations or misleading inferences.

The rural people's knowledge is also enhanced by a richness of idea discrimination not easily available to the centre's science. This could be derived from their innate ability to use a range of experience and more of the human senses than a scientist. The above claim is supported by Blurton and Melton (1976), whose study of the poor people in Africa concluded that the superior abilities of the poor is derived from their ability to use a wider range of experience and more of the human senses than a scientist. When identifying plants the San do not rely on visual appearance only, as a conventional scientific taxonomist might. Rather;

*A bushman after his initial scrutiny will sometimes be observed to touch and feel by rubbing between his fingers certain plant parts. He may then carefully smell and also taste these parts. Finally he may repeat the whole of this procedure after he has crushed or teased apart the feature being examined. All these observations can be of great assistance to him in successfully establishing the identity of a plant which for various reasons may offer problems in straight forward identification. It may be mentioned that this procedure is but rarely adopted by the conventional ecologist and for obvious reasons usually cannot be adopted by the indoor taxonomist. Thus again is made manifest the detailed and in fact superior approach of the Bushman to one aspect of plant taxonomy, and the welter of facts which when coordinated and learned form the basis and substance of his practical plant lore (Chambers, 1983).*

The knowledge economy of the centre is dominated by people who are located in headquarters of the giant TNCs, NGOs, and powerful political administrations. Their knowledge is the conveyor belt of wealth from the poor regions of the world. Researchers are used to advance the interests of the developed world. According to Chambers (1983), researches on rural poverty and underdevelopment are conducted by universities and NGOs. The later undertake field research (for example, Centre for Development of People in Ghana, CARE in Cameroon, Red Cross in Lesotho, Save the Children in Mali). International agencies have also been involved in rural poverty and underdevelopment assessment researches, for example UNDP in Togo, and UNICEF in Lesotho. However, the researchers are eurocentric and their studies are instituted from the top. The disadvantage with

such arrangements is that it is the people who are neither poor nor staying in rural communities who set the agenda for research. Researches on rural poverty and underdevelopment are carried out in line with the budgets and terms of reference of the funders; and the funders are the not poor and not rural people. Chances are high that the funders advance an agenda that does not speak to the interests of the rural poor. In such a scenario, whose knowledge will come out of such studies? The hypotheses of such studies are formulated away from the research areas (rural communities) or are based on evidence from another research that was conducted by the not rural. The knowledge economy is built incrementally. According to Creswell (2002), such studies are likely to be ineffective in providing answers to the concerns of the marginalised (the rural poor in Africa). It is almost obvious that the knowledge so gained from such a study is likely to benefit the knowledge economy of the centre than that of the poor people. Good researches need to be participatory in nature. In fact, the rural poor need to have a higher stake in the search for anti-poverty and underdevelopment strategies. This can be achieved if the knowledge economy of the poor is combined with that of the not-poor before, during and in reporting findings of researches.

The mismatch between the knowledge of the centre and the periphery can be caused by several things. The centre under perceive rural poverty and underdevelopment, they are attracted to and trapped to urban cores which generate and communicate their own sort of knowledge while rural communities are isolated and neglected. According to Chambers (1983), the researchers exhibit six biases against contact with and learning from the poorer people. The first bias is spatial – The researchers tend to favour urban areas, rural areas that are connected by tarmac roads. Under the roadside bias, the researchers tend to prefer collecting data from villages that are close to roads. According to Owen (1997), a workshop in Mozambique concluded that many communities especially those that are accessible to urban communities are mostly the subjects of excessive research. The researchers do not want inconveniences that are associated with travelling to villages that are remote; and yet the poor of the poor are located in such areas. The second bias is project related. Researchers prefer places where there are other projects. In this bias, the researchers tend to prefer to research on issues that have been addressed by others. The fact that the worst poor in the rural areas are remote keeps them away from the interest of the researchers.

The third bias is person related; researchers tend to prefer respondents who are better off – smart, expensively dressed. According to Cowling and Sugden (1994), researchers also tend to prefer men rather than women, users of services and adopters of practices rather than non-users and non-adopters, and those who are active, present and living. The preference of men to women ignores the fact women are some of the most vulnerable members of the African society. The knowledge that is generated from such studies is likely to exclude the views, feelings and

perceptions of the very poor. The fourth bias is related to seasons of the year. Researchers avoid the bad times of the wet season. They fear that their vehicles will be stuck in mud and that their clothes will be soiled. Researchers tend to avoid such seasons and yet this is the time when the poor are busy on their fields, lack enough food, weak and are prone to diseases such as malaria. By avoiding such seasons, the researchers miss important knowledge about how the poor survive the worst season of the year. Researchers tend to prefer summer when the villagers have harvested and are free from diseases that are associated with wet seasons.

The fifth bias is diplomacy-related. The researchers avoid involving the extremely poor maybe because they are weak, dirty, less educated and diseased. At worst, the researchers fear contracting the diseases; they are not convinced that the extremely poor people can present any valid information about rural poverty and underdevelopment. By taking that decision, researchers miss critical information about the lives of the poor. The sixth bias is related to research methodology. According to Narayan and Nyamwaya (1996), the problem that keeps the centre away from the knowledge economy of the poor lies between the method and practice of research, and insight into the conditions and needs of the rural poor. Because of the bias, the researchers are confined to the concerns of the centre's specialization. It is the knowledge of research of the centre that dominates the research methodology at the expense of the research methodology of the poor rural communities. As a result, the poorer rural people are little seen and even less is the nature of their poverty understood. The bias directs the attention of the researchers away from the poorer region, the poorer people, and the poorer times of the year also affect the researchers in the choice of locations to study.

Mostly, the centre learns about rural poverty and underdevelopment through questionnaire surveys. According to Mutesa and Muyakwa (1983), these provide data for the planners, statisticians and economists who most easily straddle the two cultures. They also minimize the rural contact required of the urban based professionals who use them. However questionnaire surveys often take more time and resources. According to Holland and Blackburn (1997), researchers who practice total emersion in the villages of the poor learn much in depth.

Research on rural poverty and underdevelopment is sponsored by practitioners for their purposes and carried out by academics for theirs. It is commissioned by governments, aid agencies such as UNDP and DFID, foundations and private and parastatals organizations. What research is carried out, how it is done, how it is written up, and its consequences or lack of consequences vary greatly. The calls for proposals by Governments, CODESRIA, UNDP, DFID etc all have sponsorship conditions and requirements to be met. Chances are high that those who meet the requirements are the most unsuitable to carry out research in rural communities. There is a danger that researchers from the centre are hand maids of whoever commissions the research, doing only what they are told to do.

The researchers are also constrained by the time factor. They work according to deadlines; the time horizon of researchers is usually very short, which compromises the depth and comprehensiveness of the research. The budgets of sponsors set dates by which information must be available if it is to be used. For instance at the peri-centre, decisions on agricultural pricing, on the quantities, timing and distribution of agricultural inputs, or on the estimates of next year budgets, have cut off dates for data collection. The pressure from either the centre or the peri-centre compel researcher to gather data under pressure. Where projects have political priority, researchers might be forced to produce findings that suit the intentions of the sponsor- compromising research ethics for political expedience. Studies may be conducted in order to justify the centre's decision to implement a preconceived idea. According to Chambers (1983), the evidence itself is imbalanced; it has been generated by top-down, centre-outwards processes of learning. The impression is that the rural poor are scanned in misleading surveys, smoothed out in statistical averages, and moulded into stereotypes.

The centre and the peri-centre disseminate the knowledge through research documents, whose language is mostly difficult for the very poor people. For instance, some reports on rural poverty and underdevelopment are quantitative. They carry deep statistical analyses which the poor people might not be able to interpret. By virtue of their poor economic background, most of the poor people in the rural communities miss the opportunity to attend formal school. In this case a formal school is an institution whose task is to disseminate the knowledge system of the centre. Since the centre's values and procedures dominate that of the periphery, one is forgiven for posing the question, whose research and for whom? Research findings are also disseminated at international conferences and symposia which are neither organized nor sponsored by the poor people in rural communities. Those who present papers and engage in dialogue on rural poverty and underdevelopment are neither poor nor rural. The venues are rarely in rural communities. Televisions, newspapers, the internet, and libraries are some of the avenues used to disseminate knowledge on rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Alas, the avenues are not readily accessible to the poor people; and the reports are dominated by the views of the centre. For instance, Kachere describes Chivi rural district in Zimbabwe as,

*Thousands of Chivi villagers are facing starvation while hundreds of children have dropped out of school as a severe food shortage takes its toll. The district has no better Ward in terms of food security. Drought, which came when the crops were at flowering stage, is . . . Several interventions have been made, one of them being the opening of Grain Marketing Board sub-depots in every Ward. This does not seem to be paying off because the people are too poor to pay for the maize. Donor agencies are failing to provide food hampers to all the*



*needy people Government has come up with the Food for Work programme where the villagers earn \$20/month (Kachere, 2011:06).*

The tone of the citation above indicates a top-down approach to reporting the situation in the district. The reporter attributes the problem to drought. It is not clear if the people of Chivi would give the same reason for the drought. They could give reasons such as the seed maize and sorghum that was donated to them was not suitable for the climatic condition of the area. Notwithstanding the effect of drought on farm yields, there could be other attending issues surrounding the poor harvest, and it is the poor people who were better placed to respond to the causes of starvation. According to the reporter, government and non state actors have put measures to deal with the problem. The analysis fails to capture what the people of Chivi are doing about their problem. The voice of the poor people in Chivi is missing from the report. Yet, the rural poor people have the ability to articulate their situation.

The rural people in Africa had and still have a way of disseminating their knowledge. Through the application of the indigenous knowledge systems, the traditional rural communities in Africa have been able to deal with different poverty and underdevelopment related challenges; they had and continue to have their medicine men to treat diseases, they had and continue to have fortune tellers to foretell events, and they collected data from the position of stars and other forms of nature to be able to predict changes in weather conditions. The coming in of the foreign knowledge system with the arrival of whites in Africa marked the beginning of decay in the traditional knowledge system. The whites began to take responsibility of modernizing the knowledge creating system of the dominated parts of the continent. The current discourse argues that the knowledge economy of the periphery was and continues to be useful in dealing with rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa.

### **Merging the two knowledge economies**

The question is how can the poor people in rural communities in Africa, so removed from the powerful, influence policy on poverty and underdevelopment elimination? Of course there is no single model for this type of work. A merger of the knowledge economies of the centre and the periphery is likely to promote participation and involvement of the centre and the periphery in research. Merging the knowledge economies is a way of including poor people in the analysis of poverty and underdevelopment with the objective of influencing policy. This will avert the question, whose values and reality count. In this regard, Chambers (1983) warns that there are many different participatory traditions; some provide the philosophy for participation, others provide the tools and some provide both. The current discourse proposes a participatory approach that involves both. However, the challenge is in determining the indicators of success. According to the World Bank

(1996i), in the past such indicators have been defined by those outside the community of the poor.

By directly involving the poor people at the community level, field work generates a better understanding of poverty and underdevelopment from the perspective of the poor. The views of the poor contribute to the analysis of poverty and the formulation of public policy aimed at poverty and underdevelopment reduction. This can be achieved if a cross section of society is included in both the creation of knowledge on poverty and the search for a lasting solution to the problem. Through deep involvement and participation of the poor people, chances are high that the knowledge system of the poor people will be incorporated in the search for a lasting solution to the rural poverty and underdevelopment crises in the continent.

The participatory poverty and underdevelopment assessment sharpens the diagnosis of poverty and underdevelopment and provides a window for people to better the priorities of the poor. One of the advantages of the assessment technique is that it directly presents the views of the poor to decision makers. Participatory poverty and underdevelopment assessments accept the notion that no knowledge economy subsumes others; different knowledge systems have much to learn from each other. The predominant research method is participatory research, which allows both knowledge economies to understand poverty and underdevelopment from the perspective of each other. A poverty and underdevelopment assessment that uses the participatory poverty and underdevelopment assessment research method gives the poor, marginalized, and excluded a voice in policymaking. One of the knock on merits of participatory poverty and underdevelopment assessments is that they increase the capacity of civil society institutions as well as governments (Robb, 2002). In Zimbabwe significant improvement is evident in areas of food security and basic social service delivery as a result of joint efforts by Government and aid partners. In this regard, the Civil Society Monitoring Mechanism (2011:21) notes, "Led by the Government and with the support of the humanitarian community, major disease outbreaks have been prevented or responded to in an effective and timely manner, averting large scale epidemics." The above view has failed to mention the role played by the rural poor communities in the fight against poverty and disease. The impression that one gets is that government and aid organizations joined forces to help deal with the challenges of the apathetic poor, which is a wrong attitude right from the onset.

Research teams, composed of the rural poor people and other stakeholders should be adequately trained before going out to research on rural poverty and underdevelopment. Even where teams are experienced in participatory methods, at least weeks or months of training are required to discuss the complexities of matching participatory tools with the research agenda; decide on methods of recording and reporting; create an initial framework for analysis of results; build up a team spirit and discuss attitudes and behaviour. Compromising on training

time and quality leads to poor quality research, because the researchers will be influenced by their value systems, which could be very different from that of the majority of rural poor. By training the researchers, one is able to reduce the level of biases of the outsiders. Usually these people have a tight schedule back in the cities and so are always in a hurry to return to their comfortable zones outside the rural communities. When they conduct a fieldwork in the rural areas, they go with provisions such as mosquito nets, stretcher beds, water, cooler boxes, canned food, medicine, and toiletries; they are not ready to experience the life of the poor people in the rural areas. The people from the centre must be willing to live in the rural areas for extended periods of time, living the same way the poor people live. According to Chambers (1983), this is not new to social scientists, Paul Devitti, living in the remote village of Kuli in the Kalahari Desert, kept a dozen cattle in order to understand village life and economy by experiencing it from the inside. Paul Richards found that working at farm tasks with farmers in their fields elicited information he would not have known to ask for and his informants would not have known to volunteer.

The research teams will need to disseminate the research output to the concerned stakeholders in a language that they understand better. Dissemination of studies to communities helps build ownership and awareness; and it also increases involvement of the local communities in the poverty and underdevelopment debate. According to Robb (2002), the process of disseminating research findings could be a promising vehicle for deepening the understanding of poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas. However, the success of the strategy would also depend on the level of trust and understanding developed among those who use different approaches to defining research agendas and collecting and analyzing data with the aim of influencing policy decisions on rural poverty and underdevelopment eradication in the continent.

### **Conclusion**

The discourse noted that the rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa is a result of the competing interests of the knowledge economies. The people who are in the forefront of fighting rural poverty and underdevelopment are mostly those who are neither poor nor living in rural areas. The prejudices of the centre make it difficult for the not rich people to understand poverty and underdevelopment of the rural communities. The paper argued that the evidence that is collected and disseminated by the centre may not reflect the needs and aspirations of the rural poor. This raised the question, whose knowledge and for whose benefit? The discourse noted that the difference in the knowledge systems of the centre and the periphery is what hinders the fight against the poverty and underdevelopment in the rural communities in Africa. The discourse is centred on the centre-periphery theory. However, the theory was found to be inadequate in dealing with issues of

rural poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. The theory was modified to suit the new focus on the causes of rural poverty and underdevelopment. The discourse recommended merging of the different knowledge economies in the fight against rural poverty and underdevelopment in the continent.

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