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## **The World Development Report 2009: The Beginning of A Space Odyssey?**

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## The *World Development Report 2009*: The Beginning of A Space Odyssey?

### Introduction

- 1 It was exactly forty years ago. The World Bank followed the recommendations of the Pearson Commission, which had been set up in order to evaluate the consequences of development aid. It was necessary to combat urbanisation, the Commission stated, by means of policies acting upon factors triggering rural migration and by supporting small regional centres (Ramsamy 2006). For her part, the urban planner Jane Jacobs published *The Economy of Cities* (1969), a work which reversed the evolutionary view shared by development theoreticians according to which cities are born from the surplus generated by the rural economy. Contrarily, Jacobs argued that cities develop due to their internal dynamics resulting from the multiplication and diversification of economic activities. At a time in which the rural exodus was demonised, Jacobs (1969: 104) added: *“To limit the size of great cities is often advocated, because of the acute problems arising from size, is profoundly reactionary”*.
- 2 Forty years later, the World Bank and Jane Jacobs seem to have reached common ground on this issue. *“Restricting the growth of cities is not the answer”*, the multilateral institution now claims in its latest *World Development Report* (World Bank 2009: 144). Although the majority of developing countries have wished to establish policies aimed at limiting urban growth, the Report notes that concerns with the *size* of cities must give way to deeper thinking on the *function* of urban centres. Urbanisation is a way of leaving poverty behind, the Report states in the introduction to its chapter dealing with density. Specifically referring to the work of Jacobs to comment on the evolution of Bamako, Abidjan or Lagos, it then maintains that this way, although not linear, may lead to a certain convergence of the standards of living between urban and rural areas and within urban areas.
- 3 This spectacular shift of view towards urbanisation, which has also been greatly inspired by the New Economic Geography (NEG), has not left the geographers unmoved. And so the publication of the Report has been greeted by a volley of criticism, which has been directed at both the range of the analysis tools and the meaning of the development policies. Some authors have for example pointed out that the Report, whose ambition was to reshape economic geography, was primarily written by economists and that the literature produced by the geographers was ignored, particularly that dealing with the social and cultural production of space (Bryceson et al. 2009, Rigg et al. 2009). These authors have noted that the Report neglected the diversity of urban contexts and based its argument on *“stylized facts”* which sometimes contradicted certain developments observed in South America or Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly as regards the convergence of standards of living and economic specialisation. Others have made much of the risk of two-speed development which would result from the implementation of development policies based on privileged support given to innovative regions (Giraut 2009). Finally, some geographers have highlighted the fact that the Report made only few recommendations as regards development policies, apart from its liberal injunctions in the area of property rights, property markets and market liberalization (Scott 2009).
- 4 Continuing the analyses of Scott, this contribution more closely analyses the way in which the Report comprehends Division, which together with Density and Distance constitutes one of the three fundamental dimensions of development. Referring on Chapter 3 which deals with territorial divisions and on Chapter 9 which mentions the integration of poor countries into the world economy, particular attention is devoted to Sub-Saharan Africa inasmuch as this

continent is, more than any other, confronted by the triple challenge of density, distance and division.

## New scales, new areas

- 5 For geographers studying borders, the interest shown by the Report in the effects of territorial divisions marks a turning point. From the beginning the Report embraces a multiplicity of geographical scales in its analyses of development. This distinction is important inasmuch as the three fundamental dimensions of development are not expressed in the same way depending on whether these different scales are considered: density seems to be the most important dimension on a local scale, as it favours agglomeration economies, distance is a critical variable on a national scale as it influences the mobility of factors, and division constitutes the major challenge on an international scale while restraining the process of integration.
- 6 Although the national level remains the level used most, the Report introduces three novelties, which should delight the geographers. Firstly, it utilizes a framework of geographical analysis more detailed than the customary publications of the World Bank, using sixteen regions instead of six. Quite rightly noting that the opposition between rural and urban is fruitless, it secondly identifies the different components of the continuum from rural to urban, in other words villages, small and medium-sized towns, large urban centres and metropolises, which then enables it to very briefly distinguish three types of urban configuration according to their complexity. Thirdly, the Report addresses specific themes by means of functional cross-border areas. So, building on the work of the Sahel and West Africa Club (OECD 2009), the development potential of cotton in West Africa is understood on a cross-border scale of the production basins straddling the borders between the Ivory Coast, Mali and Burkina Faso or between Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Chad.

## Market-driven and policy-driven integration

- 7 The policies recommended by the Report aim on the one hand to improve cooperation between neighbouring countries by encouraging spillovers, economies of scale and the setting up of larger internal markets, and on the other hand to encourage the integration of poor countries into the world economy by means of access to world markets and external investments. The Report is of the opinion that the strategy to be adopted depends on the proximity of each country to the large world markets. It identifies countries close to these markets (for example Tunisia), which need policies enabling them to connect up with the activities of their powerful neighbours, countries distant from the large world markets but with a large economy (for example Brazil), which need institutional reforms to facilitate commerce and the mobility of labour together with infrastructure-related policies, and finally countries distant from the large world markets without an economy of any significance, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia. For these countries, the Report recommends that institutional reforms, infrastructure-related policies and cross-country compensation mechanisms be implemented together. For West Africa in particular, the Report recommends that development policies be differentiated according to the potentialities of the *areas* concerned: “*to exaggerate somewhat, development strategies for leading areas should invest in places, and strategies for lagging areas should invest in people*” (World Bank 2009: 282). And so it calls for priority investment in infrastructure and greater integration into world markets for the *countries* along the Gulf of Guinea, together with assistance in education, health and other social infrastructure in the landlocked Sahelian *countries*. Nevertheless, this approach appears controversial, given that it may be possible to identify relatively advanced *areas* from the economic point of view, which however rarely territorially correlate with *countries*. In fact, not all of the coastal zones are dynamic and not all of the Sahelian areas are depressed.

- 8 The Report clearly identifies the two dimensions of integration, namely integration by the market and integration by institutions. As a large amount of work in urban geography has shown, there is not necessarily a correspondence between these two dimensions: some regions for example are very well integrated from the point of view of the economic players but are only poorly integrated by institutions. This particularly holds true for West Africa, where integration by the market is mainly accomplished by means of private networks of large entrepreneurs, whereas supranational organisations, although numerous, have proved to be hardly capable of stimulating development dynamics resembling those of the EU. The Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), for example, has enabled the promotion of labour mobility between sixteen West African countries but not the encouragement of formal trade, which remains subject to administrative harassment and corruption at the borders.
- 9 In order to remedy this situation, the Report distinguishes between “*behind-the-border reforms*” which can be performed on a strictly national level in West Africa, bilateral activities which may facilitate movements “*at the border*”, and finally “*beyond borders*” agreements which may result from regional cooperation, mainly in the form of regional agreements. As regards infrastructure, the Report stresses the necessity of supporting the development of technologies making it possible to increase the movement of persons, goods and ideas within functional areas, as in the case of the Maputo Development Corridor between Mozambique and South Africa or the trunk road serving the large metropolises of the Gulf of Guinea, within the framework of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Finally, as regards the coordinated incentives which may facilitate regional integration, the Report recommends the multilateral agencies and donors to support the efforts of the African countries to open up their borders to the world markets, for example by granting them privileged access to the markets of the OECD.
- 10 This liberal model approach makes light of the importance of institutions in the process of constructing regional economies. Particularly in the West African context, in which supranational institutions are generally ineffective and new municipalities are usually deprived of resources, the main issue of development is less to succeed in opening up the markets than to succeed in constructing and legitimising formal institutions in an informal environment. As Scott (2009: 585) recalls, “*localized competitive advantage is a political as well as a market process*”. Hence this pending question, which one would have wished to see addressed in the Report: what might be the form of the institutions entrusted with promoting regional integration, in the knowledge that the economic players derive their wealth from their ability to bypass existing institutions by means of illegal transactions or to come to agreement with the representatives of these institutions using patronage networks and corruptive practices?
- 11 Up to now, the informal economic networks created by West African entrepreneurs have constituted a response to the challenges posed by the uncertainty of the markets. Working with differential prices on either side of national borders (division), they set up networks from economic diasporas established in the urban markets (density), which enable them to control economic flows on a regional or global scale (distance). The importance of these players in the process of regional integration is noted, but the Report does not dwell on their contribution to local development. The existing literature shows that traders play an important role in West African informal networks but are usually unlikely to invest locally in urban development. In addition to a preference for ostentation, most of them are opportunists, who do not hesitate to explore new markets and form foreign communities (see, among others, Egg and Soulé 1993, Meagher 2008, Walther 2009). Against this background, the Report says little about what local authorities could do to benefit from the border economic activity. Should the local urban elites try to build political alliances with economic entrepreneurs? Or should they rather

try to establish strategies of cross-border development with other border municipalities that share similar problems with them?

- 12 Referring to the work of Grégoire (a geographer!) and Labazée (1993), the Report makes much of the importance of urban centres on borders which, like Sikasso in Mali, Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso and Korhogo in the Ivory Coast, function both as transit centres for imports destined for the large Sahelian markets and as regional centres for cash crops. In doing so, the Report breaks with a long tradition based on alarmist rhetoric and marked by distrust towards the process of urbanisation (Salomon Cavin 2009). The Report suggests that some twin cities share common problems in West Africa but it does not really explore what development agencies could do to encourage the building of institutions. How could these agencies play an active role by helping local municipalities to create better conditions for trade activities at a local level? As a matter of fact, border activity is not only based on circumstantial opportunities: border markets often rely on large and expensive investments such as storage facilities or road infrastructures which can severely impede daily border activity if they become degraded. Support for market activities at a local level and especially in border areas would contribute to opening up sectors of the West African economy. Another alternative would be to promote cross-border cooperation at a local level by helping municipalities develop a common strategy for functional cross-border economic areas. The Report contains too little about this issue.

## Crossing borders

- 13 By arguing that development policies must be differentiated according to the complexity of the issues raised by urbanisation in each of the countries, according to the size of their market and their proximity to the large world markets, the *World Development Report 2009* certainly works to reinstate space in economic analysis. Space is no longer understood as a blank slate upon which undifferentiated policies are placed, and become a variable of his own in the equation of economic development. Some geographers will find that this is still too little and will complain that the Report gives only a partial picture of what economic geography is today. Others will not blame economists for being interested in what is at the very heart of economic geography, i.e. issues related to regional growth or decline, patterns of location of economic activity, the origins of cities and urban structures, favoured by density, distance and division.
- 14 More generally, this Report should make a contribution to stimulating thinking on the relationships between geography and economics, which has already given rise to passionate debate in the English-speaking countries. Different alternatives have been discussed: contending with orthodox economists on their territory at the risk of being “devoured”, allying with emerging knowledge in social sciences dealing with economics (Amin and Thrift 2000), or restructuring the main concepts and tools of the discipline around a solid empirical corpus (Rodríguez-Pose 2001) which is able to respond to questions of inequalities and power (Martin and Sunley 2001). From this point of view, the Report confirms that relations between geographers and economists are characterized less by hostility than by mutual ignorance (Duranton and Rodríguez-Pose 2005). It is not only the merchandise of the Dioula and Hausa traders of West Africa mentioned in the Report which sometimes has difficulties crossing borders. The ideas of geographers and economists do also.

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