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Mismeasuring Humanity: Examining Indicators Through a Critical Global Studies Perspective

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Abstract: Social and economic indicators measure and monitor the relative level of each country's "progress", be this in education, poverty, mortality, gross domestic product and so on. This essay examines indicators in the contemporary development paradigm and their use by the United Nations, World Bank, NGOs and corporations, as well as their increasing presence in global governance decision-making. Drawing upon a critical global studies perspective, I argue that indicators are producing and privileging certain kinds of knowledge over other kinds of knowledge that may not be so easily "captured" by nationally structured numerical reductionism. Reflecting on the limitations of the Human Development Index and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, I suggest that the empirical data produced ultimately mismeasure the fullness of human experience and often undervalue non-western worldviews. I conclude by returning to the insights suggested by a global studies perspective and offer a number of recommendations for envisaging and shaping a more inclusive post-development paradigm.

Keywords: indicators, development, knowledge, global studies, global south, MDGs/SDGs

This essay foregrounds a critical global studies perspective in an effort to examine the production of social and economic indicators generated primarily by the global north about the global south.¹ Specifically, I am interested in how indicators may reinforce and further inequalities between developed and developing societies and regions. This essay is primarily about a certain form of knowledge

¹ I use the terminology "global north" and "global south" loosely to demarcate wealthy industrialized societies in comparison to poorer postcolonial societies that may or may not have emerging economies. These terms are not intended to reference homogenous groups or states that map onto geopolitical regions of the world. Issues typically characterized as pertaining to the global south (i.e. extreme poverty, illiteracy, corruption, refugees) are found in the global north, and vice-versa.

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production that carries many global consequences. The general questions that inform this discussion are: Who produces knowledge about whom? What form does this knowledge take? How is this knowledge amassed and disseminated? And perhaps most importantly, what instrumental action does this knowledge enable? Adopting a critical global studies perspective allows us to question the largely taken for granted production of quantitative knowledge about the global south that is classified into metrics and indexed indicators, and becomes an essential feature in guiding global economic policy and development initiatives.

Social and economic indicators numerically quantify a huge range of factors deemed important in calculating a country's profile and relative level of "progress", be this in education, poverty, mortality, rule of law, gross domestic product (GDP) and so on. These quantitative indicators inform an international development paradigm, and are heavily relied upon by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, NGOs, corporations, civil society organizations and the United Nations Development Programme which has offices in 177 countries around the world. This dependence upon indicators carries forward in assessing human development as measured through the Human Development Index (HDI) and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As has been noted by scholars, indicators increasingly inform decision-making and policy implementation at various levels of local, national and global governance (Merry 2011, 2016; Davis et al. 2012; Merry, Davis, and Kinsbury 2015; Cooley and Snyder 2015; Rottenburg et al. 2015).

My overall objective in this essay is not to categorically dismiss the use of quantitative data which would be very foolish, if not impossible. Quantifiable measures and statistical data can, in certain contexts, play an extremely important role in helping to paint the big picture, make comparisons, and provide leverage for social, political and economic change. My hope is to present a cautionary tale about the undue influence that the global north gives indicators over other forms of knowledge that may not be so readily reducible to numerical calculation. Rather than summarily rejecting the quantitative approach, I am suggesting that we use indicators more judiciously and critically, and counter-balance them with other forms of qualitative and local knowledge.

The use of indicators is pervasive in our daily lives. Some scholars argue we live in an "audit culture",² referring to the fact that that today, more than any other period in history, it is widely assumed that human experience is calculable

² According to Cris Shore, an audit culture arises in "contexts in which the techniques and values of accountability have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct – and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating" (Shore 2008, 3).

and “subject to explicit forms of measuring, benchmarking and technical intervention” (Cohen 2015; Strathern 2000; Shore 2008). This veneration of numerical indicators offers a seductive illusion of control that I tend to think of as a cult of quantification. Anthropologist Sally Merry in her article “Measuring the World” calls indicators “a political technology” that can be used for both good and bad purposes, and she warns that because of their widespread acceptance we must be very wary of how our world is being increasingly subjected to such forms of managed measurement. According to Merry:

As forms of knowledge, indicators rely on the magic of numbers and the appearance of certainty and objectivity that they convey. A key dimension of the power of indicators is their capacity to convert complicated contextually variable phenomena into unambiguous, clear, and impersonal measures. They represent a technology of producing readily accessible and standardized forms of knowledge. Indicators are a special use of statistics to develop quantifiable ways of assessing and comparing characteristics among groups, organizations, or nations. They depend on the construction of categories of measurement such as ethnicity, gender, income, and more elaborated concepts such as national income. Indicators submerge local particularities and idiosyncrasies into universal categories, thus generating knowledge that is standardized and comparable across nations and regions (Merry 2011, 85).

Examining the cultural logics that inform the authority of “objective” quantitative data reveals the ideological dimensions of the development paradigm which relies heavily on categorizing, counting and measuring some facts about humanity but not others. It also reveals a particular European modernist worldview that values scientific and empirical knowledge, and gives authority to essentializing, compartmentalizing and measuring particular aspects of people’s lives and translating these experiences into universally applicable indicators. Understanding these logics may help us to appreciate the limits of such knowledge. It may show us that such data is not necessarily inclusive of non-western people’s cultural values or understandings of themselves in their own terms. It may even show us how we are engaged in a system that is, intentionally or otherwise, mismeasuring humanity and to reflect upon what that gross violation means as we move forward into the middle decades of the twenty-first century. My hope is that by appreciating the limits of quantitative data produced by the global north, alternative forms of knowing and imagining may be granted weight in thinking about how best to confront today’s global challenges that ultimately impact us all.

I open up the essay in **Part I** with a discussion of the emerging field of global studies and discuss some of the innovative ways it promotes thinking about old and new problems facing societies around the world. Drawing on the insights of a critical global studies perspective, **Part II** examines imperial

histories where quantifying indicators of difference between people became a standard way of managing others and maintaining a distance between “us” and “them”. This logic of differentiation, I argue, is as important today as it has been in the past. In **Part III**, I turn to the economic expertise of Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, both Nobel Prize winners in Economics, to discuss the limitations of our contemporary “accounting frameworks...through which we see and analyze the world” (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010, xx). Stiglitz and Sen argue that the world’s reliance on GDP as an indicator of social well-being is limited and in effect amounts to the “mismeasuring of our lives”. Building on their reasoning, I turn to the United Nations annual reporting of a Human Development Index (HDI) and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as specific instances demonstrating the limits of indicators in assessing societies around the world. I conclude with reflections on the limitations of statistical indicators in finding adequate solutions to twenty-first century problems, and posit how a critical global studies approach may help avoid some of the obvious shortcomings of our dominant “audit culture”. To that end, in the conclusion of this essay I list a number of recommendations for envisaging and shaping a more inclusive post-development paradigm.

Part I: A Critical Global Studies Perspective

Scholars increasingly appreciate that processes of globalization call for new theoretical, analytical, methodological and pedagogical approaches. This call is driven by the need to move beyond an earlier preoccupation with describing globalization to analyzing its many processes, facets and impacts through interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Across the social sciences and humanities scholars are becoming attuned to the global dimensions of their research as it is refracted through a global imaginary (Steger 2009), even when their research is on the surface nationally or locally framed. This is because processes of globalization do not just occur beyond the nation-state, but manifest and come to bear at various spatial scales within, across and between conventional national orientations. Today, global studies scholars are increasingly engaging with diverse impacts of the global at the local level and promoting engaged research, often through historical and qualitative methods, in an effort to explore various modes of culturally informed knowledge production (see for instance Appelbaum and Robinson 2005; Amar 2013).

Thinking about global processes as manifesting along a local/global continuum informs the field of global studies and gives it its unique spatial and conceptual framing. Processes of globalization involve “big” material and

thematic concerns with a geopolitical reach beyond the nation-state, as well as subnational localized processes. Hence global studies scholars study obvious substantive topics such as immigration and climate change, as well as less obviously “global” topics at localized scales that may include sexualities, nanotechnologies and personal/group identities. Scholars now recognize that global-scale processes become manifest in the lives of ordinary people and across the full range of human activities and experiences (McCarty 2014b). The global can be found in large cities but also in villages and neighborhoods. The global can be found in multinational corporations but also in the workplace and in the rituals of daily life. The global can be found in grand historical narratives as well as in individual life stories. The ability to grasp global-scale issues, to integrate larger global systems analysis into a multilevel analysis of the entire global/local spectrum, to see the global through the local and vice versa, is a new way of understanding the world. In short, what makes any subject matter “global” are the questions one asks and the methods one employs that explore interconnections across past and present, across disciplines and analytical frames, and across substantive issues that up until relatively recently have been predominantly contained by and conceptualized through the geopolitical unit of the nation-state (Darian-Smith 2013a, 2013b).

A number of scholars have sought to characterize the essential features of global studies scholarship (Juergensmeyer 2011, 2014; Duve 2013; Nederveen Pieterse 2013; Gunn 2013; Steger 2015; McCarty 2014a). Mark Juergensmeyer, one of the founding figures in global studies, lists five key characteristics that include transnationalism, interdisciplinarity, connecting past histories to contemporary analyses, promoting postcolonial and critical perspectives that don't privilege a Eurocentric view of the world, and fostering a new sense of “global citizenship” (Juergensmeyer 2011). These characteristics speak to the challenges of the twenty-first century that are destabilizing the modernist nation-state paradigm. Nation-states are being reconfigured in light of new economic, political and cultural dynamics operating beyond, within and between countries and that call into question state-bound concepts of nationalism, identity, citizenship, economy, governance, law and so on. This is what people mean when they say we are living in a postnational age (Darian-Smith 2015). In this context Giles Gunn, another leading global studies scholar, outlines what he calls the “cosmopolitan challenge” for global scholars. By this he means how can we conceptualize living in a more humane and ethically informed world that is not driven by self-interest and is open to living and thinking “with others” (Gunn 2013, 13). Thinking with others necessarily entails making room at the table for people normally excluded from the processes of knowledge production (see Wiebke et al. 2014). It means the active fostering of new forms of agency,

participation and expression within the wider contexts of our rapidly shifting geo-political landscape. This “critical prism” is what Manfred Steger suggests is one of the unique characteristics of the field of global studies that seeks “an understanding of the global as a multipolar dynamic emerging from the Global South as much as from the North” (Steger 2015, 6).

A global studies perspective recognizes geopolitical spatial dynamics that are not restrained or contained by a nation-state framing. Global-scale issues can be distributed, decentralized and deterritorialized. This means that global issues are not only large and complex, but like the Internet they can also be decentralized and distributed across times and spaces. Global processes tend to have a de-territorialized quality in that they are everywhere and nowhere, or at least not neatly contained within established geo-political borders in the ways we are accustomed (McCarty 2014b). Global processes may have a multiplicity of centers and peripheries. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues in his article “What is Global Studies”, we need a “multicentric” approach that more closely examines new hubs of power, connectivity, and exchange that takes into account “concerns not just from New York, London, Paris or Tokyo, but also from the viewpoint of New Delhi, Sao Paulo, Beijing or Nairobi” (Nederveen Pieterse 2013:10). Adds Boike Rehbein, in a multicentric “the peripheries have entered the centers (and vice versa), while dominant and dominated are not homogenous groups” (Rehbein 2014, 217). Importantly, adds Philip McCarty, these multicentric hubs may have no hierarchy, obvious directional flow or even clear linear causality (McCarty 2014c:3).

Drawing upon a broad range of scholarship (anthropology, religious studies, sociology, subaltern studies, global history, comparative literature, economics, law, geography, critical race studies and ethnic studies to name the obvious), a global studies approach raises new questions about the world and in turn highlights the need to rethink our dominant analytical concepts, methods and approaches. According to George Lipsitz, “New social relations around the world are rapidly producing new social subjects with their own particular archives, imaginaries, epistemologies, and ontologies....epistemic upheavals require us to rethink fundamental categories about place, time, and knowledge...” (Lipsitz 2010, 12–13). Taking a cue from ethnic studies, a global studies approach requires us to rethink our dominant forms of knowledge production and promote engagement with critical voices and plural epistemologies that typically are not represented in accepted western scholarship (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986). This suggests that all global analyses must include marginalized voices speaking in non-English vernaculars, many of which may bear witness to the injustices in a global system that includes gross inequality, extreme poverty, human rights abuses, exploitation of human and natural resources, environmental

degradation, regionalized violence and genocide (McCarty 2014b; Darian-Smith 2014). It is only by deliberately making room for these critical voices and alternate epistemologies, as well as sharing with non-western scholars editorial power in the production of new knowledge (Smith 2012), that global studies gains the potential to recognize and engage with the many facets of the most serious global issues facing the world today.

However, it must be pointed out that valorizing and legitimating non-western epistemologies involves much more than providing passive moral support or active material support. Western scholars must overcome their ethnocentrism and be prepared to have their own worldviews changed by pluralistic ways of knowing (Santos 2007). This is very difficult for some scholars in the global north who remain convinced of their own intellectual superiority. Yet the unpacking of dominant paradigms should be considered positively, as a creative, constructive and inclusive process that challenges us to confront our own parochialism and at the same time make new analytical syntheses possible. In short, it is an opportunity to overcome the “provincial, arrogant, and silly” posturing of western scholars who assume their work applies to the entire world (Rehbein 2014, 217). More significantly, it is the surest path to surmounting the inherent limitations of western scholarship, making new productive avenues of inquiry possible, discovering new ways of looking at global issues, and producing more just and sustainable outcomes.

This recognition of the fundamental need to promote, embrace and learn from people outside the Anglo-Euro worldview builds upon the sociology of knowledge literature which points to the need for thinking beyond the nation-state. As sociologist and global studies scholar Ulrich Beck has argued, “The zombie science of the national outlook that thinks and researches in the categories of international trade, international dialogue, national sovereignty, national communities, the ‘state nation’ (*Staatsvolk*), and so forth, is a ‘science of the unreal’... Just as nation-based economics has come to a dead-end, so too has nation-based sociology” (Beck 2005, 23).³ Similarly, the sociologist Michael Burawoy calls for the embracing of the social sciences and humanities, and pushing back against the instrumental rationality of neoliberal marketization. Notes Burawoy, this new interdisciplinary approach “has to be distinguished from economics that is primarily concerned with the advance of market society and political science that is concerned with the state and political order – Northern disciplines ever more preoccupied with modelling a world ever more remote from reality” (Burawoy 2014, xvii). Adding to this conversation, Nour

³ This quote appears in the mission statement of the Global Division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. <http://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/pageid/1239/m/464> accessed 1 April 2015.

Dados and Raewyn Connell argue that “the *epistemological* case for a remaking of the social sciences has been firmly established. The great need now is to develop *substantive* fields of knowledge in a new way, using perspectives from the South and what might be called a postcolonial theoretical sensibility” (Dados and Connell 2014, 195). This requires, says Boike Rehbein forcefully, “not more and not less than a critical theory for the globalized world” (Rehbein 2014, 221).

In the context of this essay, the field of global studies reveals the limits of quantitative data in the form of indicators to represent the complexities of our interconnected global world. Quantitative data is collected primarily by wealthy global north countries as a means of measuring, monitoring and comparing countries. This data is organized around, and locked into, a modernist paradigm in which the centrality of the state system is taken as a given. Consequently indicators, as a technology of power, are producing and privileging certain kinds of knowledge over other kinds of knowledge that may not be so easily “captured” by nationally structured numerical reductionism (see Merry and Wood 2015).

Yet even more alarming than the denial of certain kinds of knowledge is the naturalized universalism of indicators as an appropriate way to produce knowledge about people. The presumptive authority of numerical indicators makes it very difficult to challenge their legitimacy. Notes anthropologist Frédérique Apffel-Marglin:

Western epistemic knowledge presents itself as having universal validity and application. This is nowhere truer than in the field of development, both as knowledge and as practice. Development relies heavily on expert knowledge, particularly on economics, but on all the other social sciences as well...This expert social scientific knowledge is largely epistemic in character. This means that practitioners do not perceive themselves as the carriers of a particular cosmology or ontology rooted in particular historical and cultural contexts but rather as the wielders of a neutral method that enables them to accomplish certain goals. These goals – be they individual preferences or the choices of governments – are seen as being legitimate loci for values, but the tools, methods, and means to attain them are themselves seen as neutral. This is particularly true of economics, but applies as well, in various degrees, to the other social sciences (Apffel-Marglin 1996b, 142–3).

My contention is that global studies, as an emerging field of inquiry, stands poised to help dislodge the “epistemological universalism” promoted by the global north and create new theoretical contributions relevant to the world’s multiplicity of cultures and ethnicities, and thus capable of accommodating individual and collective identities, inter-subjectivities and ways of being (see Darian-Smith and McCarty 2016). As I discuss in the next section, a critical global studies approach highlights the ideological and epistemological dimensions embedded in the cultural logics and instrumental rationality of today’s

globalized “audit culture”. As critical global studies scholars, we must be highly attuned to these dimensions if we are not going to replicate, albeit in different ways, the colonial and imperial violence of our western intellectual forebears.

Part II: Long Histories of Mismeasuring the Other

The dominant instrumental rationality of the global north traces its intellectual roots back to the rise of scientific knowledge that enabled the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Max Weber identified this transition as the rationalization of society that accompanied the development of rational-legal knowledge and the institutions and bureaucracies that characterize modern nation-states (Weber 1950). “This form of reasoning travelled outside the West with trade, colonialism, and the spread of industrialization and the market economy. The dominant system of knowledge maximizes instrumental control and renders its wielders not only the ‘the masters and possessors of nature’, as Descartes put it, but also the engineers of social reality...using quantification and measurements such as statistics, censuses, maps etc...” (Apffel-Marglin 1996a, 11–12). Today, instrumental rationality has become the central way we organize our concepts and behaviors and measure value in the world. In the context of development, it is the underlying logic that justifies the measuring of essentialized differences between the global north and global south – between the more “civilized” and “advanced” economies and what seems the inherently less sophisticated, less law-abiding, and less progressive emerging economies. That these measurements are intended as benchmarks by which to monitor “reform” and “progress” affirms a western value system that universalizes what constitutes the concept of improvement.

The characterization of *distinction* between the west and the rest harks back to centuries of European colonialism that suppressed and dominated peoples around the world (Bourdieu 1986; Said 1978). The idea that white Europeans were intellectually and socially superior fueled an attitude of superiority that was voiced by Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. By the mid-nineteenth century the attitude of superiority became couched in the language of biological determinism and race (see Lorimer 1978). The racialized ideologies of the west justified the domination and exploitation of colonial subjects, in turn leading to naturalized “racial formations” and identities that were systemically and institutionally reinforced through legal and political institutions (Omi and Winant 2015). These racialized formations informed what W.E.B. Du Bois understood as a global system of oppression (Porter 2010; Darian-Smith 2012), that in turn relied upon deeply embedded

cultural perceptions of difference between a civilized “west” and a highly romanticized and ultimately inferior “other” (Said 1979).

By the late nineteenth century, distinctions between “us” and “them” were calculated and organized around standardized metrics developed by scientists, anthropologists, missionaries, soldiers and colonial administrators (see Figure 1). Physical differences between peoples provided the evidence that there existed a hierarchy of mankind. Not surprisingly, this hierarchy positioned white Caucasian males at the top and indigenous peoples of the world (who typically are dark in skin tone) at the bottom. Data collection became a highly bureaucratized technology of power deployed by European nations as a means to know and control conquered populations (see Cohn 1996; Ittmann, Cordell, and Maddox 2010; Gould 1996). Deemed scientifically “objective”, this form of evidence was hard to refute and provided the justification for imperial modes of exploitation and domination. Specifically, physical and cultural differences between peoples provided the means for Europeans to justify slavery, and in the case of native peoples, genocide.

In his book *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Gould argues that biological determinism and the counting of differences between people is only one area in which statistical mathematics was increasingly permeating western ways of looking at and understanding the world. Gould argues that there is a long-

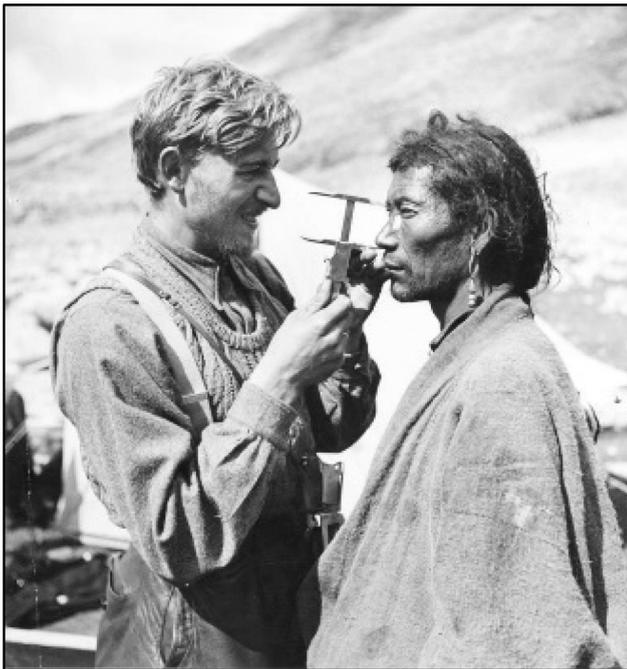


Figure 1: Anthropologist Bruno Beger conducting anthropometric studies in Sikkim (1938) Photographer Ernst Krause. German Federal Archives. Wiki Creative Commons.

standing tradition in western thought of “*reductionism*, or the desire to explain partly random, large-scale, and irreducibly complex phenomena by deterministic behavior of smallest constituent parts; *reification*, or the propensity to convert an abstract concept (like intelligence) into a hard entity (like an amount of quantifiable brain stuff); *dichotomization*, or our desire to parse complex and continuous reality into divisions by two (smart and stupid, black and white); and *hierarchy*, or our inclination to order items by ranking them in a linear series of increasing worth” (Gould 1996, 27). As Gould notes, these elements of modern western epistemological thought were valorized in advanced industrial economies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, serving as the ideological and epistemological platform upon which modern imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and economic theory flourished (see Figure 2). Gould also underscores the role played by anthropologists in furthering this form of thinking about others, and it has often been said that anthropology acted as the “handmaiden” to colonialism.



Figure 2: John Mowbray, Calcutta merchant, seated at a desk piled with account books, attended by a banian or money agent and messenger. Oil on canvas. Originally published in c.1790. Illustrated by Thomas Hickey. The British Library.

In the later years of the nineteenth century, social-Darwinian theory helped fuel the eugenics movement which set out to classify human beings on the basis of blood and genetic ancestry.⁴ This classification system was used to identify people with particular hereditary abnormalities such as diabetes, deafness and color blindness, and mental retardation. It was also used to identify large bodies of people based on their supposed racial ancestry, grouping them by skin color, shape of eye, size of brain and so on (Darian-Smith 2010, 166). Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, was a key figure in the eugenics movement and as well as a brilliant mathematician who helped develop statistical modeling.⁵ Galton was interested in, among other things, the artificial breeding of livestock and plants to promote particular traits or qualities. Drawing upon statistical data Galton argued that traits of intelligence, which he regarded as hereditary, could be promoted through social engineering of selective breeding to create superior humans. Coining the word “eugenics” in 1883 in his book *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and its Development*, he then set up an Anthropometric Laboratory in London and set about collective measurements such as height, weight, life expectancy and so on from over 9,000 people. “Working with these data, Galton sought, and found, a confirmation of the existence of what is known in statistics as the normal, Gaussian distribution: the familiar bell-shaped curve” (Shipman 1994, 115; see also Stigler 1989; Darian-Smith 2010). For his inventing linear regression and the statistical correlation coefficient, and for his development of a scientific (though flawed) basis for human distinction, Galton was knighted by King Edward VII in 1909. In the context of this essay, what is horrifyingly fascinating is the intertwined histories and close intellectual connections between statistical mathematics and biological determinism.

Today, measuring the size of indigenous people’s brains would no longer be deemed acceptable. However, we really haven’t moved as far beyond this type of quantitative measurement as one might have hoped. The global north remains fixated on indicators about non-western peoples such as relative levels of education, poverty, adherence to human rights and so on. The obsession with data collection found an extreme expression in the Human Relations Area Files

⁴ The leading nineteenth century social evolutionary thinkers such as Hubert Spencer, Ernest Haeckel, Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton thought that inferior races would either catch up with superior races and assimilate, or alternatively simply die out. They did not seek sterilization programs or strategies to “improve” mankind as did many of those who promoted eugenics.

⁵ It seems that Charles Darwin was not totally convinced by Galton’s theories, though he did not actively oppose them either. In a further ironic twist of fate, Darwin’s son, Leonard Darwin, served as president of the Eugenics Society in England from 1891 to 1928 (Shipman 1994, 121).

which was a joint project of leading American universities set up to record data about different cultures around the world. Established in 1949 (one year after the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights), the Human Relations Area Files was intended to provide universally valid information about human behavior around the world. While the Human Relations Area Files has been largely discredited in the twenty-first century, new modes of data collection and knowledge production about societies have been developed such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with its annual reporting of a Human Development Index (HDI), and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which has sought to give political clout to the UNDP objectives. The HDI and MDGs present knowledge in the form of social and economic indicators produced primarily by the global north about the global south over the past two decades. These indicators are used by the United Nations to measure and rank countries with respect to various indices of compliance, development and progress. As mentioned earlier, such measures are used by the World Bank, international banks, NGOs and civil society organizations and increasingly inform decision-making and policy implementation at various levels of local, national, and global governance.

I am not suggesting that the production of indicators by the United Nations means that it functions as a neo-imperial international organization intent upon dominating and exploiting peoples in the global south. It could never be said that the United Nations has simply appropriated the political, economic and cultural agenda of former European colonial powers. At the same time, the cultural logics that gave credibility and legitimacy to a global political economy based upon appropriation of global south resources, including that of human labor, endures in contemporary forms of paternalism such as that expressed through United Nations institutions and related aid organizations. So while the contemporary objectives and goals of the United Nations are assuredly very different from Europe's former colonial powers, the logics and thinking about how to achieve those objectives and goals remain rooted in nineteenth century relations of difference between a global north and global south.

Moreover, the empirical indicators deployed by the UN and a vast number of related development agencies are grounded in the same methods as those used by former colonial empires. These methods prioritize the numerical over the subjective, the universal over the particular, the scientific over the interpretative. Yet as noted above, the methods by which indicators are conceptualized and calculated are not politically neutral and are deeply rooted in the values of the Enlightenment and modern capitalism. That numerical measures are naturalized and largely unquestioned in our knowledge system does not mean that they are devoid of ideological and cultural bias. Hence it could be argued that today's

indicators are functioning, despite the best of intentions, in ways similar to earlier modes of colonial management and calculated distinction. The words of Edward Said are pertinent here: “The thing to be noticed in this kind of contemporary discourse, which assumes the primacy and even the complete centrality of the West, is how totalizing its form, how all-enveloping its attitudes and gestures, and how much it shuts out even as it includes, compresses, and consolidates. We suddenly find ourselves transported back in time to the late 19th century” (Said 1994, 22). As critical global scholars, it is essential that we at least be aware of the postcolonial implications in what anthropologist John Conley calls our current “tyranny of measurement” (Conley 2011, 93).

Part III: Rethinking the Development Model

Before the global economic recession hit in 2008, a Commission was established to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress. The Commission was led by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen (former Nobel Laureates in Economics), and Paul Fitoussi, professor of economics and president of OFCE in Paris. The Commission released a report in 2009 which was published a year later under the title *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP doesn't add up* (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010). The rather unlikely history of the Commission is that it was sponsored by then president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, in an effort to understand the gap between economic data that claims a society is making progress and citizens “whose experience of life is completely out of synch with the story told by the data”. As noted by Sarkozy, in a world of increasing global inequality “This gulf [of incomprehension] is dangerous because the citizens end up believing that they are being deceived. Nothing is more destructive of democracy” (Sarkosy 2010, viii).

In the Preface to the Commission’s report, Stiglitz and his two co-authors reflect upon the use of measurements in people’s everyday lives. They note that “the theories we construct, the hypotheses we test and the beliefs we have are all shaped by our system of metrics. Social scientists often blithely use easily accessible numbers, like GDP, as a basis of their empirical models, without enquiring sufficiently into the limitations and biases in their metrics. Flawed or biased statistics can lead us to make incorrect inferences” (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010, xix). Overall, the Commission’s findings are that conventional GDP indicators are inadequate in measuring and calculating quality of life issues that are not reducible to material and market values. A more holistic approach needs to be developed that includes “multiple metrics”. This is particularly the case with respect to global issues such as the environment. According to the

Commission, “When problems of globalization and environmental and resource sustainability are combined, GDP metrics may be essentially misleading. A developing country that sells a polluting mining concession with low royalties and inadequate environmental regulation may see GDP increase but well-being decrease” (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010, xxii).

The Commission acknowledged that its findings were not unique and that advances in research have already pointed out many of the limitations of GDP that the report summarizes. The Commission also referenced the existence of alternatives to GDP such as Bhutan’s index of Gross National Happiness (GNH) that was established in the 1980s expressly in response to the shortcomings of indexes based on market values and “monetary measures” (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2010, 92). GNH indicators include a range of quality of life issues including spiritual and psychological well-being as well as cultural and ecological vitality. GNH has now been adopted by a number of countries as well as taken up by the UN General Assembly in its 2011 Resolution 65/309 titled “Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development”. While there has been criticism leveled at the imprecision of calculating subjective experiences, the GNH has gained support worldwide and was the focus of much attention at the United Nations Climate Change conference in Doha (2012) (Bates 2009; Tideman 2011). These conversations build upon earlier theoretical contributions of postcolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Ashis Nandy who have argued for the need to take into account the psychological elements of colonialism affecting both the colonized and the colonizers (Nandy 1983; see also Gunn 2013).

The increasing weight given to the subjective and ethical dimensions of economics indicate a slight shift in mainstream economic thinking away from the “rational actor model” that informs neoliberal policies and permeates the global political economy of the twenty-first century.⁶ Against this dominant western worldview, progressive economic theorists are positing alternative modes of human existence and being. Amartya Sen’s concept of “development as freedom” (1998), economic historian David Landes’ emphasis on the importance of culture in economic development (1998), and Elinor Ostrom’s promotion of the commons (2009, also a Nobel Prize winner in Economics) have nurtured critical thinking about the

⁶ Notes economic anthropologist Stephen Gudeman in his book *Economy’s Tensions: The Dialectics of Community and Market* (2012), “Calculative reason, with its mandate to be efficient, fills a person’s day in many high market societies; choosing, often rhetorically justified by the notion of individual freedom, penetrates our lives... Calculative reason is not only a central component of market practices, everyday ideology, and public policy; it makes up the standard definition of neoclassical economics, according to which individuals choose rationally” (Gudeman 2008, 8).

limitations of economic indicators (and their premise of calculative reason) to encapsulate the richness of human experience. Yet it should be noted that on this matter the global north is well behind the more critical thinking emerging from the global south. Developing and underdeveloped countries have been well aware of the limitations of market-driven indicators for many decades. Subjected to aggressive development policies in the form of structural adjustments programs and burdensome debts imposed by the World Bank and IMF, people in the global south know the power of market-based indicators to lock them into a system of distinction from their wealthier neighbors in the north.

The international development paradigm established in the second half of the twentieth century relies heavily upon indicators collected by western nations to measure, calculate, compare and assess the relative progress of cultures and countries. Indicators are a central “political technology” in the development model and management of international relations (Escobar 1995; Sardar 1999). According to global studies scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse:

Conventional development is a politics of measurement, a matter of “fixing” within limited spheres, achieving a desired change by manipulating indicators and modifying numerical relationships, such as the ratio of external debt to GDP, or debt to exports. The gap between economic development and social and cultural development, is reproduced in the institutional division between the Bretton Woods institutions and the UN agencies, in which the former hold the purse strings. Indeed, this mathematical universe is inhabited in many different ways for the sake of macroeconomic and financial management, by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Bank of International Settlements; for economic growth in combination with sustainable development and poverty alleviation, by the World Bank; for “human development” aspects like schooling, health and housing, by the UN Development Programme and other UN agencies. *They all share a commitment to social engineering* (Nederveen Pieterse 1999, 72; my italics).

The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) and the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are two leading examples of the use and the limitations of indicators. The First Human Development Report was published in 1990 by the UN Development Programme and laid out the HDI as a new set of metrics. The HDI looks at three elements in calculating “human development”: (i) life expectancy, (ii) level of education, and (iii) standard of living as determined by a person’s income (GNI). The HDI was endorsed and utilized in the framework of the Millennium Development Goals which was established in 2005. According to the UN website, “The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions. They have

galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest." An annual report on MDGs "presents the most comprehensive global assessment of progress to date, based on data provided by a large number of international organizations within and outside the United Nations system. The aggregate figures in the report provide an overview of regional progress under the eight goals and are a convenient way to track advances over time" <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>).⁷

The HDI and the MDGs provide a global platform upon which statistical data in the form of indicators about developing and developed countries are gathered, promoted and disseminated around the world. Together these indexes inform a wide range of formal and informal decision-making, and have proven very important in targeting programs, resources, and expertise within the development framework. As the annual UNDP and MDG reports show, great improvements have been made in terms of alleviating poverty, fighting tuberculosis, decreasing infant mortality rates and so on around the world. Yet as Sally Merry and Summer Wood note, these statistical data also present what they call "the paradox of measurement". What they mean by this phrase is that certain issues that have been subject to measurement and counting in the past continue to have a presence in global decision-making, whereas "new ideas, concepts, and modes of measurement are more likely to flounder on mistranslation and the inability to commensurate. Since what is counted is what becomes visible, the implications of this disparity are that some things become more readily seen while others disappear from view" (Merry and Wood 2015, 207; see also Atkinson and Marlier 2010; Fukuda-Parr 2015). In their case study on child rights in Tanzania, Merry and Wood highlight five dimensions of translation that must be addressed in order for indicators to have commensurate meaning across "continents, languages and cultural contexts" (Merry and Wood 2015, 210). The authors conclude that the "paradox of indicators is that in order to be globally commensurate, they cannot be rooted in local contexts, but in order to accurately reflect local situations, they need to be" (Merry and Wood 2015, 217).

In the context of knowledge production, the systemic problem (or paradox) of translating indicators across different societies and cultures highlights the core

7 The United Nations is now deeply engaged in a post-2015 Development Agenda that involves the defining of 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 separate targets that build upon the existing 8 goals but also reflect heightened concerns with environmental degradation and resource depletion. On 25 September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the UN General Assembly which officially replaces the MDGs with the SDGs. Unfortunately, according to some commentators, "the new goals are turning out to be even more unwieldy than their predecessors... The result – familiar to the development field in general and the UN in particular – is that everything is a priority and so nothing is a priority" (Beattie 2014; see also Hickel 2015).

limitations of indicators to reflect and speak for non-western communities that fall outside the epistemological worldview of the global north. In this way, indicators intrinsically perpetuate a development paradigm, based on calculative reason, in which the global north gathers information it deems important about others and promotes what it sees as appropriate modes of reform based on such data. The global north maintains a grip on the center of power by controlling the form and substance of knowledge production and hence terms of engagement between peoples around the world. The global north also controls the means to determine who has made sufficient “progress” and so worthy of reward or punishment in the form of increased or reduced aid and international support. This assessment may have a range of material and ideological consequences. As Lila Abu-Lughod has noted with respect to the 2005 Arab Human Development Report, shortcomings as gaged by indicators tend to pathologize certain cultures and in the case of the report affirmed the “backwardness of the region” (Abu-Lughod 2009, 98). Adds Fida Adely, “Development discourse, rooted in a colonial discourse about native backwardness, consistently contributes to negative representations of Third World ‘others’” (Adely 2009, 118).

The asymmetrical relationship between the global north and global south in the production of knowledge and capacities to evaluate “progress” has been a huge concern amongst local communities, activists and civil society organizations, particularly in poor countries and resource-depleted regions. People find themselves trapped into providing certain types of information in order to receive aid and support, often without the means to gather data in the first place (Dar and Khan 2011). Others are frustrated that they are unable to modify or change the categories or suggest new forms of assessment that they may feel better reflects their worldview. An example of this frustration is the controversial alternative Arab HDI (AHDI) which was introduced by the Egyptian economist and sociologist Nader Fergany to modify the HDI so as to better assess development in the Middle East and North Africa regions. The AHDI has never gained much traction, even within the Arab Human Rights Development Reports (see Hasso 2009).

Still other critics are concerned that indicators reduce complex issues into a numerical calculation that fails to assess actual achievements. According to one commentator, ‘Quantitative targets also ignored quality considerations: as Malawi’s former president Joyce Banda said: “We are all racing toward achieving education for all by 2015. But did we have classrooms in Malawi? Did we have desks? Did we have teachers? The MDG demands that we get as many children as possible into school – but what about quality?” (Beattie 2014). Furthermore, the MDG focus on primary education ignores the importance of secondary and post-secondary education (Tarabini 2010).

Overall, indicators have helped to provide certain benchmarks and monitor progress in specific areas of life. In many cases, they have provided political leverage

and have enabled civil society organizations and governments to effect positive change. In some instances they have been successfully adapted by local/regional communities to better reflect their own values and non-western worldviews.⁸ Yet despite these positive developments, the persistent over-emphasis of quantitative data downplays the symbolic dimensions of human relations and makes it more difficult to see the ideological continuities and connections between colonialism, racism, imperialism, modernization and globalization (see Obeng-Odoom, 2013). By doggedly focusing our attention on “dumb” material objects the cult of quantification minimizes opportunities for voicing social criticism. So while there have been vast improvements in the quality of life for many people according to some indicators, there has also been widespread condemnation by the global south of the HDI and MDGs which impose a top-down vertical administration onto communities and reduces extremely complex issues into simple numerical targets (Fehling, Nelson, and Venkatapuram 2013) (see Figure 3).

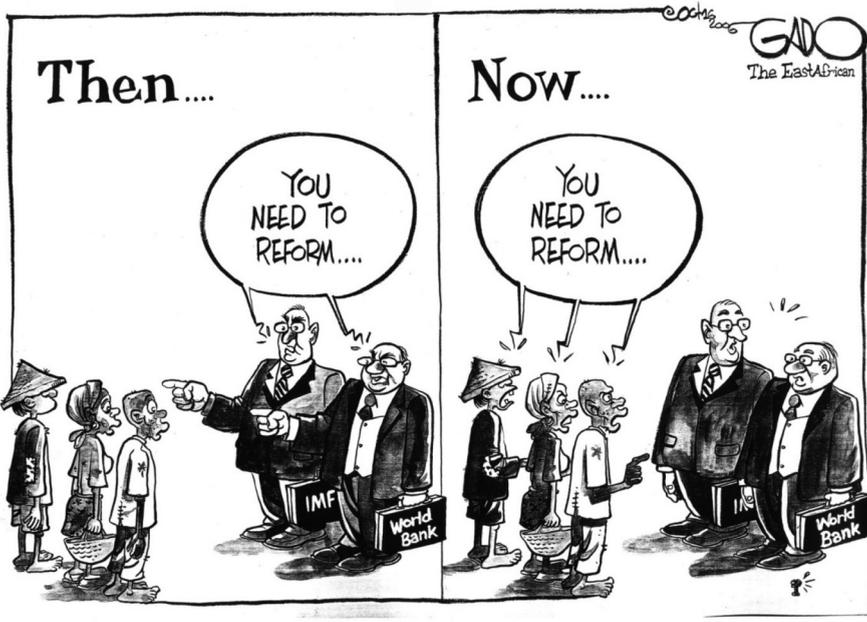


Figure 3: “You Need To Reform”. October 16, 2006. By Godfrey “Gado” Mwampembwa, a popular political cartoonist in east and southern Africa. Copyright permission granted. <http://gadocartoons.com/>

⁸ These adaptations are modifications of established indicators, rather than suggesting an entirely different form of assessment. Thus these adaptations ultimately adhere to, and draw their legitimacy from, a dominant discourse imposed by a hegemonic development paradigm.

Concluding Comments: Indicators from a Global Studies Perspective

A critical global studies perspective suggests that we need to move beyond debates over how to refine existing indicators and related problems in implementing and assessing them. As discussions attest around the post-2015 Development Agenda and new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these debates remain bogged down in the cultural logics and histories of counting differences between people and reinforce the “epistemological universalism” presupposed in commensurate statistical data. A global studies perspective offers innovative ways in thinking beyond our dominant “audit culture” and speaking more directly to the interconnected global challenges facing us all in the twenty-first century.

A global studies perspective highlights the need to think of people not as individual units but connected through networks of social relations to local communities, collective sensibilities, memories, places, languages, ideologies, religions and long histories that continue to inform the present. A global studies perspective offers ways of thinking beyond “the paradox of measurement” by posing new questions that reflect a multicentric, decentered, deterritorialized, postnational and epistemologically plural approach that more adequately represents the geopolitical realities of our current age. It offers a perspective through which to engage with inequalities among and between individuals that do not privilege a nation-state framing. This means recognizing that states are not always considered to be the only source of agency and change, and that local communities can make a difference. It means acknowledging that economic development is not necessarily a causal consequence of state institutions and centralized “good governance” (Cooley and Snyder 2015), and can in fact emerge through sub-state and trans-state grassroots movements.

More specifically, a global studies perspective points to deeper intercultural tensions that turn on the vast disparities of wealth and power between and within the global south and global north. It shows us how the development paradigm, while extremely profitable for some in the short-term, is socially, politically, ethically and environmentally unsustainable in the long-term. More pointedly, it highlights the degree to which elites (from the global north and global south) continue to profit from development practices that rely upon universalized indicators that discredit local knowledge, traditional cultures, and non-western worldviews. By referring to the long histories of oppression as promulgated by statistical modeling and mismeasuring of cultural difference, a global studies perspective exposes the enduring political and social biases of

number counting which can never be considered objective. In short, critical global studies perspectives are essential to counter-balance the dominant logic of market-capitalism.

Ultimately, a global studies perspective posits the need to think more holistically about issues in which western cultural logics are only one dimension in the understanding of intercultural relations. In the context of the HDI and MDGs, this means acknowledging that “objective” empirical data are constructed and convey specific priorities and values. It also means recognizing that international organizations, NGOs and development scholars – often unwittingly – mimic the market-driven logics that are the root-systemic cause of the structural violence and inequality that they seek to ameliorate. As noted by scholars of the global south, “despite the call for development to be remade with an emphasis on human ends and choices, economic demands and neoliberal economic determinants still frame the indicators of development successes” (Adely 2009, 117–8). Global studies scholars take seriously critiques of a system that many people in the global south say further discrimination and oppression. For instance Samir Amin, director of the Third World Forum in Dakar, Senegal, argues that the writers of the MDGs have in fact promoted “apartheid on a global scale, reproducing and deepening global polarization...Although imposed on the societies of the South with extreme brutality, the new model [of global capitalism] has to be clothed in a discourse that gives it the appearance of legitimacy. It was necessary to reintroduce the word “development” (as in the MDGs) but empty it of all meaning” (Amin 2009).

In concrete terms how does a global studies perspective help us to move beyond the limitations of indicators and our dominant “audit culture” as it is applied within a development framework? The following is a list of possible first steps.

1. **Alternative epistemologies:** The global north needs to recognize that many kinds of knowledge and meaning exist in the world, and that many of these are not reducible to calculable indices.
2. **Empirical measures are not neutral:** The global north needs to acknowledge that indicators are not neutral or objective. This means recognizing that indicators typically reflect free-market ideologies and the priorities of corporations and institutions of the global north. In short, who does the counting, why counting is being done, and what is being counted, matters enormously.
3. **Indicators have a long ugly history:** The global north should recognize that indicators have a long historical legacy linked to cultural violence and racism. This historical legacy sits squarely within the contexts of European colonialism, imperialism, development and globalization.

4. **Indicators are a technology of power:** The global north should recognize that the quantification of others through development indicators must be understood as a technology of domination and power.
5. **Indicators are manipulable:** All actors and stakeholders working within the development paradigm (state governments, NGOs, aid agencies and so on) should openly admit that indicators are manipulable and can be used to shape agendas and justify pre-determined objectives.
6. **Indicators should be used judiciously:** The global north should use indicators only with a clear understanding of their historical and contemporary limitations.
7. **Quantitative and qualitative measures:** Indicators should be used in conjunction with, and corroborated by, qualitative data. This suggests that economic analyses of complex human experiences should not be viewed as quantitatively superior but rather as qualitatively deficient. To put it another way, quantitative economic analyses should not be viewed as empirically rigorous but rather as materially superficial.
8. **Revitalizing local knowledge:** There is a worldwide need to revitalize alternative knowledge systems which indicators have overlooked, ignored or denigrated for decades. So even when quantitative and qualitative elements are used in measuring societal change, these measures should be confirmed at the local level through local knowledge producers.
9. **Creating new measures:** New forms of measurement should be determined by those being assessed. These may include, as the GNH attempts to do, psychological, aspirational, emotional and imaginative elements that may not even be thinkable within a western worldview let alone reduced to numerical calculation. This means that the global north needs to appreciate that psychological and subjective factors have political and economic ramifications.
10. **Power Sharing:** The global north must make room for local communities to participate in the decision-making processes that affects them. This means more than just adopting development jargon that seeks to “empower” people. It means really letting go of the mechanisms of control, making compromises, letting others determine the terms of engagement, nurturing self-determination and autonomy, and accepting that people make mistakes and that they should not be punished for that.
11. **Rethinking the development paradigm:** In valorizing a bottom-up approach that actively seeks the involvement of people in localized contexts, the global north needs to adapt its goals and objectives. Specifically, it needs to give up its aspirations to manage and control

others as well as to determine “proper” outcomes for peoples from different worldviews and value systems.

The degree to which these eleven steps are feasible within the current development paradigm remains a huge question. As it currently stands, the development paradigm is put into practice and enforced by the United Nations, World Bank, NGOs, multinational corporations, and a wide range of international agencies. Together these institutions affirm the “cult of quantification” and through the use of indicators continue to exert enormous power over the poor which make up the majority peoples of the world. In the context of this dominant development paradigm, it is important to recognize the degree to which these institutions may be mismeasuring humanity. It is vital to ask questions such as “How are we to learn to think and feel not simply about others, or even for them, but with others in the face of global architectures that have become ossified, callous, or obsolete?” (Gunn 2013, 13). And it is essential to optimistically imagine what an ideal world might look like rather than floundering within a system of enduring discrimination and making excuses for it. A critical global studies perspective presents a new set of more inclusive scholarly conversations in which some of the details of counter-hegemonic frameworks are at least being talked about.

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