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Introduction

‘Tales of Development: People, Power and Space’ has been written to mark forty years of commitment to the field of development geography by Ton van Naerssen. To understand the importance of his contribution to human geography and development studies we borrow his own words. In 1997 Ton van Naerssen wrote:

*I, for one, hold as basic belief [...] that human geographers who occupy themselves with the developing countries are most interested and engaged in matters of poverty, exploitation and dependency, and their counterparts emancipation and ‘empowerment’.* (Van Naerssen, 1997: xix).

Through 19 essays, all concomitant with Ton van Naerssen’s words by taking an engaged and academically critical perspective, this book reflects on a number of important themes. These themes concern: the role of critical theory and the need for academics to position their contributions in public debate; the importance of civil society for development; the implications of changing identities as related to an articulation of space; the role of globalization on people’s lives and livelihoods; and the significance of migration. In this manner this edited volume contains an insightful set of critical tales of development.

Ernst Spaan opens this book by elaborating on the themes recurrent in the work of van Naerssen over the years. These themes more or less constitute the backbone of development issues and this book.

The first theme covered by the book deals with ‘Critical Geography and Social Space’. Huib Ernste extensively reviews what critical studies and geography in particular means. Like many others in this book, he sketches the need to know the ontology of one’s theoretical starting point. This starting point is formed by the beginning of an academic career. Paul Hebinck takes this one step further by elaborating a critical perspective on land reform with the central argument that a sound understanding of social development and action requires going beyond structural models of development. De Haan takes a similar perspective by showing that in popular livelihood analyses there is little attention for spatial dimensions of development.

Ton Dietz, Annemieke van Haastrecht and Rudolf Scheffer take us back to the seventies when development in the South was understood in terms of peripheral capitalism. Poor empirical evidence at that time made the authors leave Marxist inspired theories. But a confrontation with the situation in Zambia today makes them consider trying it again. Sef Slookweg narrates in his contribution about the soul searching within SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, which sought to recapture the relevance of its development aid interventions. In a perhaps somewhat unusual style, he depicts the usefulness of internal debates about measuring one’s impact.

The second set of chapters ‘Migration Trajectories’, deals with migration, and return migration. The latter is discussed by Tine Davids and Ruerd Ruben. They debate on the unhappy marriage between migration and development within the context of stricter controls of European states to control the influx of migrants. Martin van de Velde takes this discussion further by attempting to model migration, particular with regard to East-West migration patterns. One of the big
questions we face is what to do when we take constitutions serious as this may
mean that borders become meaningless. Joris Schapendonk and Lothar Smith
build on the prior contributions by focusing on the contradictions between
the opportunities given to migrants to travel the world and the flows these migrants
create—notably remittances— to do the same. With regard to transnational flows
established by migrants Marisha Maas discusses the particular case of Philippine
migrants in The Netherlands, zooming in on the dynamics of cultural dimensions
through transnational exchanges.

The theme ‘Acting on Globalisation’ discusses actions by groups and
individuals to change the world. In their contribution Ankie van der Camp and
Ben Janssen explain what art means in a global context. This chapter is
significant in being more than a tribute to artists in Southern Africa by also
attempting to carve out a relevant political space for social action. Frans
Schuurman, in his typical style, critically positions development studies within
the dynamic and changing context for development and academia. Therein
development studies for whom, and for what, remain the key questions
academics need to ask themselves. Bas Arts follows this argument of global
acting through by taking us into the forest. His argument is that we need to move
beyond global governance as a political practice to embrace the notion of politics
of scale. Paul Hoebink debates the dynamics of foreign aid by addressing the
critical issue of coherence. He argues that the debate lack on foreign aid
continues to lack voices from the South. In his chapter he therefore discusses
some of the Southern perspectives on the coherence of European policies vis-à-
vis developing countries. The finally contribution to this theme is by Cor van
Beningen, who discusses the meaning of increasing scarcity of raw materials,
energy and food for global economic relationships, leading to a possible
redrawing of the geopolitical world map. He wonders whether we are we moving
from a unipolar to a multipolar world.

The final theme of ‘Redefining Regions and Identities’ specifically deals with
regional issues. Luuk Knippenberg en Saskia van Bruchem debate the
relationship between development dynamics and democracy in Thailand. Bas
Hendriks and Arnout Lagendijk discuss the meaning of regional development in
the context of growing global integration and increasing global economic
competition. In their view regional governance will become a key issue to
consider in contemporary regional development. Paul van Lindert focuses on
current trends of decentralisation and urban governance in Latin America.
Although it is often maintained that traditionally local governments are the
weakest link in the public sector, he argues how Latin America is showing a
growing variety of promising and innovative initiatives at local levels that may
lead to improved urban governance. The last contribution of Françoise Barten
and Geert Tom Heikens describe the unprecedented challenge posed by rapid
urbanization and the deepening inequalities in health conditions presently rising
within and between urban settings in the South. Their plea is to arrest this
development through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research.

Paul Hebinck,
Sef Slootweg
Lothar Smith