

The Social Sciences and Humanities in Africa: Which Way Forward?

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Abstract

Africa is at the crossroads, torn between the quest to develop and compete with other countries of the world, and the urgent need to solve the plethora of problems haunting her, such as horrific poverty, tribalism, civil strife, widespread diseases etcetera. Against this background, how then does the Social Sciences and Humanities come in?

This paper takes the view that the Social Sciences and Humanities if given its rightful place, both in the curricula and in the socio-economic and political arena, can bring order, stability and a sense of direction to humanity. It is further argued that it would be foolhardy for any policy maker to give priority to the hard or natural Sciences and place the Social Sciences in the back seat.

Development in its entirety does not imply the acquisition of the latest state of the art electrical and electronic equipment, skyscrapers and super-highways. In the paper it is argued that development can only be meaningful if it takes into consideration the feelings, hopes, fears and the thrust of the people's lifestyles. In short, I mean development with a human face. This is where the Social Sciences and humanities come in.

The paper will first look at the nature and role of the Social Sciences and humanities, the problems/difficulties encountered, then finally, it makes observations/suggestions on which way forward.

Introduction

The world over, governments, leaders and people are yearning for rapid development. A development that wipes out poverty improves the incomes of people, assures people of employment, a development that takes care of the environment, and finally, a development

that improves the overall standards of living of the people, promotes peace and reduces conflict.

It is believed that no development takes place without the tacit support of education. Indeed education is *sine qua non* for development. One cannot do without the other.

Similarly, you cannot have education whose curricula emphasizes on the hard or natural sciences and then believe that you can produce an all round human being who can contribute effectively to the development process.

This is where the social sciences and humanities come in. In this paper we shall attempt to look at the social sciences, its nature and role, the problems or difficulties social scientists encounter and finally, we make suggestions for which way forward. What then are the social sciences and humanities?

Definition

The social sciences may be described as the academic disciplines which attempt to apply scientific methods to the study of human relationships and organizations¹. These include political science, economics, sociology, history, geography and anthropology². They are 'social' because of their subject matter but the notion that these disciplines are sciences derives from their early attempt to model themselves on the natural sciences and the justification for it is to be sought in their objectives and their methods and from their success in relation to these.

For example the major objectives of the social sciences are the precise measurements for social phenomena, the development of reliable methods of prediction, and detailed and systematic analysis of data³, just like the natural sciences.

Similarly like the natural sciences and the social sciences, the humanities are a body of knowledge. They deal with the study of man's intellectual and aesthetic creations. Subjects that fall within the humanities include: literature, philosophy, religion, art, and music⁴.

The study of man through the humanities tends to focus on man as an individual, in uniqueness and variety. The study of the social sciences and indeed the humanities often reflects man's values.

Having looked at what the social sciences and humanities entail, let us now look at their nature and role. This is because the author of this paper believes that it is from these that we can see the vital role these subjects play in development – a development that is people driven and people oriented.

Their Nature and Role

As seen from the definition, the social sciences deal with human relationships – hopes, fears, problems etc. Social scientists observe people from various distances because different vantage points give different information about people, how they feel, act and interact⁵. This falls within the realm of social psychology, history, geography and literature.

It is true that all research for example, begins with a foundation in the philosophy of science⁶. Part of the philosophy of science focuses on ethical conduct. However, in the social sciences, it is individual beliefs about the fundamental nature of man and his relationships that are most likely to influence the scientific process. These abstract beliefs or view points are sometimes called world views, paradigms, frames of reference or models of man.

At the moment any plan for development must be based on a needs based research. In other words it must be based on fact. Thus a development economist or planner cannot plan or chart out a policy framework without sufficient data on the prevailing situation. This is where the social scientists comes in. Social policies, indeed policies *per se* are more likely to be effective in practice if they are founded on a basis of fact. Similarly, it is not possible to solve the numerous conflicts in Africa such as the Darfur crisis, the DRC conflict, Somali crisis, the Southern Sudanese problem, the Civil strife in Rwanda Cote D'ivoire etc. without due regard to the contribution of the social scientist.

Just like the natural scientist, the prime ingredient of the social scientist is objectivity (although of course in some disciplines within it like art, literature etc. subjectivity is allowed). However, in other disciplines in the social sciences, the social scientists aspires to an approach to his/her material in which the influence of his/her own prejudice and emotions will be kept to a minimum.

Such an approach, he/she believes will enhance the possibility of a fully comprehensive study by increasing the range of factors in the situation which he/she is able to acknowledge and take into account and will thus facilitate his/her search for empirical truth.

Secondly, in his/her attempts to increase his/her understanding of social phenomena and provide a basis for valid prediction, the social scientist strives to observe these phenomena systematically and to identify patterns and regularities occurring within them. This is where his/her subjectivity comes in.

The social scientists approach his subject from inside. S/he is an organic part of society, his/her presence inspires upon and affects his/her approach to his/her subject matter, and in so far as both requires its cooperation in his/her investigation, and is himself a moral being, he/she cannot remain completely insensitive⁸ either to the demands which he/she makes upon his/her 'material' or the uses to which the results of his/her investigations may be put.

In the social sciences such as economics, researchers will approach their subjects with one or more models developed within one of any different disciplines. These models are simplifications of complex reality. Economists' models of the market, for example, do not include all the complications in supply or demand. Keynesian or monetarist models for example, are the subject of academic and political dispute centered on their over-simplifications⁹. This perhaps also has a bearing on the structural adjustment programmes

(S. A. P.s) that was being talked about in the 80s and 90s by some economists as the panacea for our economic growth. In the same vein, sociologists draw on metaphors or societies as organisms or systems as the subject of unrolling dialectical force generated by changing technology or as a negotiated networks of individual meanings. Psychologists on the other hand model behaviour as stimulus and response or complex cognitive processes.

In short, emphasis should be placed on the fact that just as the hard sciences explain substances, the social sciences are important in explaining social reality to a reasonable degree.

In the foregoing paragraphs we have attempted to look at the nature of the social sciences. We noted that in so far as methods are concerned, the social sciences are (similar to some extent) to the hard or natural sciences although by its unique nature it also uses subjectivity in approach to the study of human beings. We also noted that social problems inherent in society are not the sole province of any discipline or even the social sciences in general, but that even novelists, journalists as well as political and government officials all deal with social problems. Social scientists do however have a unique perspective on social problems because in their quest for the truth they ply their trade from the inside.

Indeed, Frankfurt-Nachmias¹⁰ answers his own question, when he poses the question thus: "What does science have to offer to people who take an interest in societal problems?" The ultimate goal of the social sciences is to produce an accumulating body of reliable knowledge. Such knowledge would enable us to explain, predict and understand empirical phenomena that interest us. Furthermore a reliable body of knowledge could be used to improve the human condition. Before we look at how this body of knowledge from the social science can improve the world, perhaps it is appropriate to look at the problems faced by the social scientists.

AFRICANISATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

The social sciences and humanities are supposed to be torchbearers of African values, systems of power, production, mediation and distribution. However, this has not been the case because as they are currently constituted they recycle the values, systems of production, mediation and distribution of the mainly former colonies. Even in this period of the quest for an African renaissance they still diffuse and disseminate Western culture, and literally scorn and denigrate African culture as un-progressive at best and anti-progressive at worse. Given the history of the development, growth and nature of universities in South Africa, they need to enter into an open and dynamic debate on the dialectical relationship between education, training and development appropriate for the changing techno-scientific, socio-political and cultural environment (Lebakeng, 1997, p.4; 1998, p.6). The social sciences and humanities could benefit a great deal from this repositioning of universities. They would be inspired by and be rooted in the sensibilities, consciousness, aspirations and core values of the indigenous African people. It is noteworthy that whilst the social sciences and humanities have failed to be the cultural and social torchbearers in the interest of the Africanness of South Africa, the social sciences and humanities qua social sciences and humanities have not. Only apartheid-colonial social sciences and humanities failed hence the need to transform and trans-substantiate them.

Any viable transformation of the social sciences and humanities should take the African experience in its totality as an inescapable point of departure for the critique and construction of new knowledge and praxis. Africanisation should be treated as the cornerstone of transformation of the social sciences and humanities. The production and reproduction of social knowledge will have to be consistent with the core requirements of a democratising African society. In other words, there is a need for a radical and critical questioning of the dominant Western epistemological paradigm from an African perspective. Such a radical and critical questioning should ignite an epistemological break that would result in an epistemological break-through that is inspired by an African ontology. On whatever grounds, it is no longer acceptable, as it is no longer justifiable, for the Western epistemological paradigm, characterised as it is, by ethnocentric proclivities, to retain primacy and dominance in the new South Africa. Western epistemological paradigms, derived as they are from their unique ontology, cannot be transplanted in South Africa.

Africanisation should not be equated with a call for a cocoon land wherein African intellectuals and academics fear to pit their intellectual pronouncements against their counter-parts elsewhere in the global village. Nor should it be equated with intellectual fads, that is, modish ideas that rise for a time to boast intellectual egos but are destined to disappear. Africanising the social sciences and humanities is trying to establish intellectual traditions, scholarship and research culture that are rooted in, and, are strongly nourished by, and, in turn nurture, contemporary South African democratic imperatives. It is also about intellectual liberation from enforced dependence and nemesis. Only then can these disciplines produce truly South African responses to the daunting challenge of democratic transformation and to the social problems crippling the country. This is possible as long as the social sciences and humanities are not extra-societal or supra-societal but are objective affirmations of the social reality within which they are embedded. They should, therefore, not be discordant, but adapted to and integrated within African communities or the nation at large.

From the point of view of the sociology of knowledge (and one might add sociology of education) the specific and unique national objectives necessitate a need for the social sciences and humanities to be sensitive and responsive to the legitimate needs of the great masses of African people. Africanisation of these disciplines is an unavoidable process of decolonising them so that they shed their cultural alienation and social insensitivity. The social sciences and humanities have to be contextualised so that knowledge constituting such disciplines is not irrelevant to society. It is on this basis that South Africa can develop originality and uniqueness within an African context and its own standards on which to judge the general contributions of these disciplines. Currently the social sciences and humanities, like the entire education system, try to maintain international (read British) standards and recognition that are acceptable at British institutions. The social sciences and humanities have to be contextualised so that knowledge constituting these disciplines is not tantamount to the pursuit of knowledge or truth for its own sake.

Problems faced by the Social Scientists

As alluded to earlier, social scientists deal with social reality. This is a complex and unique human situation. This is with particular attention to prediction of human situations and behaviour.

There are difficulties also associated with the use of concepts. One of the preoccupations of sociology or economics for example is with the definition of its own terms¹¹.

The problems associated with objectivity also runs through the social sciences. The early social scientists for instance were influenced by the ideas of the eighteenth century philosophers' that in the world of human relations as well as in the physical world, it was possible for men to correspond with the general harmony of nature¹² and for man by the use of his intellect to bring his thought and conduct, and hence the institutions by which he lived into a perfect harmony with the universal material order.

The thesis then and indeed even today was that as there were natural laws so there were 'social' laws which could then but be discovered, would provide the basis for a rationally ordered society. Such a thesis attributed on objective quality to the "laws of society" and assumed a capacity for rational and dispassionate enquiry on the part of the social scientist. The social scientist of today¹³ has to pursue his/her attempts at objectivity of the social scientists' material. At one extreme he/she believes that all social phenomenon are interconnected and at the other recognizes the uniqueness of each individual human being and indeed of each social situation.

The factor of complexity presents him/her with difficulties in isolating his/her subject matter, and other (i.e. uniqueness) he/she is faced or as Warham¹⁴ puts: 'one cannot bathe in the same river twice'. The subject matter that is at the disposal of the social scientist is active and changing. No two individuals or groups can be studied under identical conditions and as already suggested, there is no one universally acceptable view of truth which can be taken as a starting point.

The problems described in the preceding paragraphs are issues that emerge from the discipline as an intellectual pursuit. In the following paragraphs we look at the problems that are created by the policy maker, curriculum planner and indeed even the political leaders.

At the forefront of these problems is the lack of research funds. The policy planners have not committed as much research funds as those geared towards the natural sciences. These has tended to dampen social research not only in Kenya but in the third world.

Indeed, apart from the fervent search for the organism that causes AIDS and hence the huge research for example, it is only recently that there has been a new thinking on the need to look at the social aspects – thus we have the sociologists, social workers, social scientists etc. being involved. Otherwise in the past it has been a research area dominated by medical and paramedical researchers.

On the curriculum front, some subjects such as history are unduly denied their rightful place in the teaching timetable. In the Kenyan syllabus history is lumped together with civics and/or government to be taught for two hours each week (i.e. 3 lessons of 40 minutes each). This is not enough for any serious/potential history student to master the discipline. The same can be said of the languages. Thus here we see the curriculum planners laying less emphasis on

the social sciences¹⁵. This has been because of the mistaken notion that a fast technological development can be achieved if the natural sciences are emphasized in the education system.

History however, has shown that a development that is skewed in one direction is no development. There should be harmony both in the social and technological development, if we have to produce human beings who can appreciate culture, nature and all that goes with it. Indeed, the big economies of the west such as the U.S.A., Germany, France, Britain, Holland, Canada and Japan have a well developed culture, art, etc. apart from technology.

The position of the social scientist in the third world in terms of prestige, remuneration etc. compares unfavourably with the engineer, physicist, chemist or the doctor. Time has come when this should be looked at anew.

The social scientist, studies society and prescribes ideas and or solutions to problems that are not only relevant but germane to that particular society or community. The problem has been that the issues raised, are not taken seriously by some leaders. Similarly, some social scientists, for example the political scientists are looked at with suspicion by leaders. This is because it is the nature of the subject matter of the social scientist especially history, political science etc. that unlike that of the natural scientist it tends to be controversial in nature. This suspicion is however waning at the moment.

Having looked at the nature and problems of the social sciences, how best then can these disciplines be tapped for the common good of man in Africa? In the next section we shall try to prescribe some suggestions for the future.

Which Way Forward?

Development is basically about the quality of life of a people. It involves peoples' history, economics, politics, culture etc. Thus for a meaningful development in any economy, planners must take cognizance of the fact that peoples' traditions, customs, history, political systems, music etc. must be taken into consideration. In this way the question of relevance and adaptation of the policy frameworks will be addressed. One cannot however take the peoples' needs without consulting with the social scientist. Indeed, this fact was recognized and approved by the United Nation¹⁶ in 1986 when it stated inter alia:

... 'Greater emphasis will be placed on the cultural dimension in the development process and the stimulation of creative skills and cultural life of people in general'...

This is a clear indication of the importance the United Nations places on the social aspect of development. Indeed, no development project worth its name can ignore the essential characteristics of the natural and cultural environment, the needs, aspirations and the values of the people concerned. There is need therefore to involve the anthropologist, the historian, the geographer and the sociologist in the development process be it in the social, political or in the economic front.

Similarly without neglecting the importance of creativity as expressed in intellectual or artistic activity, scholars in literature: actors, playwrights and theatre specialists ought to be

consulted. Indeed, in Kenya for example, we do not have a comprehensive policy on culture and the arts. Should it be restricted only to annual drama festivals? During political rallies or national celebrations? If more emphasis is placed on the promotion of the arts and the experts duly recognized, this would go along way in advancing cultural development. In this way, the cultural life of our society will be seen to express itself through its way of living and being, through its perceptions and self perceptions, its behaviour patterns, value systems and beliefs through drama, dance, painting, sculpture, music and theatre.

It is therefore imperative that we re-examine the place of artists in society and the ways in which they can play a part in the development process. Once we do this, we shall have achieved an integrated development that encompasses all facets of human life.

There should also be a close collaboration between the social scientists and natural scientists in the formulation of development plans. Once this is done appropriate technologies that are suitable will be used. Without this collaboration any plan or project is bound to fail. Indeed, Todaro¹⁷ while studying our plight in the Third World succinctly observes:

... "One suitable but nonetheless very Significant factor contributing to the Persistence of underdevelopment in the third world has been the transfer of often inappropriate educational structures, curricula and schools/systems, the formation of western style trade unions... the organization and orientation of health services in accordance with the western 'curative' rather than 'preventive' Model and finally the importation of Inappropriate structures and procedures for public bureaucratic and administrative systems"...

We are therefore unable to develop because we are cultural and technological prisoners, trying to fit or impose upon ourselves other people's "social sciences". The time has come when we should rely on our own homegrown experts and ideas.

Similarly, in acknowledging the cultural dimension in development and the place of the social scientist, the United Nations¹⁸ has prescribed a real scenario as an example, and how to involve the local people in the development process:

'an integrated development project may be implemented in a rural community. In order to respond more effectively to the needs and aspirations of the population concerned and to secure their active participation in the project, a special attention is paid to the cultural components and to the cultural effects of economic and social development To this end, the technical team responsible for the preparation and implementation of rural development project will be backed up by a group of local specialists in the social human sciences whose task will be in particular, to provide ways and means of consultation and concentration enabling

the local population, project leaders and educational and cultural personnel to play a part in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the project”.

In conflict resolutions, and in the promotion of peace and tolerance among people, the social scientist can play a very crucial role in studying and prescribing solutions to political problems that may be troubling certain regions. This paper takes the view that one of the many reasons why there are still conflicts, poverty, and suspicions amongst peoples in some parts of Africa and indeed the third world, is because we have not involved the social scientists adequately, in drafting development policies and forestalling potential areas of conflict.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to look at the social sciences and humanities, their composition, their nature, and problems bedeviling the social scientists in the trade. We noted that the main problem has been the failure of policy makers, leaders and implementers to one; place the social science in their rightful place and two; the remuneration of the social scientists compares unfavourably to the natural scientists.

We also noted that many leaders in the Third World indeed in Africa, believe that development means mechanization, automation and indeed more and more hi-tech equipment in their economies.

However, it is argued in the paper that a development that does not take into consideration the human needs, feelings, culture and tastes is meaningless. The paper called for an integrated development that is people driven and people oriented – a development with a human face.

This is where the social sciences comes in. It gives relevance and order – a social order that takes into consideration the welfare of the people in all realms of development.

Imagine a country with the modern state of the art equipment, without any due regard to the tradition, culture, tastes and or aesthetics of the users of these equipment? Will it be a happy nation? Certainly, in my view development that does not take into consideration all these is faulty and unacceptable.

The social sciences blends all that is moulded, invented or developed by the technologists, to make it a humane, friendly and thus a valuable product for human use.

Those ‘prophets’ who would like to ditch the social sciences and humanities to the back seat of scholarship and development are but deluding themselves. These subjects are not only essential but nourishing to the human race.

ENDNOTES

1. Warham Joyce (1970) *The Study of the Social Sciences* B. T. Batsford Ltd., London PP. 17-32. In this book Joyce makes an in depth study of the social sciences and how they can contribute to society.
2. Brown C. M., Royce Adams C., Rogers R. (1968) *How to Read the Social Sciences*, Scott, Foresman & Company, London PP. 111 – 119. In this book the authors describe the characteristics of the social sciences.
3. Adams Royce C, J. Bigby (1969) *How to Read the Humanities* Scott, Foresman and Co., London PP. 11 – 10. The characteristics of humanities, and their value is analyzed in this book.
4. Judd C. M., Smith E. R. and Kidder L. H. (1991) *Research Methods in Social Relations* – 6th Edition. Horace, Brace Javanovich Coll. Publishers, New York pp VI – 4. Apart from describing the Research methods in the social sciences, the book also looks at the nature of the subject.
5. Adams G. R. and Schevaneveldt J. D. (1991) *Understanding Research methods*, 2nd Edition, Longman, New York. PP. 8 – 36. These authors describe research and the role of the social scientist.
6. Warham J. Op cit P. 22
7. Warham J. Op cit P. 31

8. Shipman M. (1973) *The limitations of Social Research* 3rd Edition, Longman, London PP. 19 – 22. For further reading on the legacy of the past and nature of social research, read at this book.
9. Nachmias Frankfurt Chava, Nachmias David (1992) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* 4th Edition PP 9 – 20. The book describes research and research aims in the Social Sciences.
10. Warham J. Op. cit. P. 28
11. Warham J. Op. cit. P. 25
12. Warham J. Op. cit P. 27
13. Government of Kenya (1992) *Secondary Education Syllabus Vol. 6*, K. I. E. Nairobi PP. 1 – 36. Here the Secondary Education Curriculum is described as ‘broad based and aimed at building on the concepts, principles and skills in the primary cycle’. Its main objective is to prepare the learner for self-reliance training and to lay a foundation for development, integrity, adaptability ... and patriotism. However, the lessons and objectives prescribed for teaching History and Government to me is insufficient and difficult to attain.
14. UNESCO (1987) *A Practical Guide to the World Decade for Cultural Development 1988 – 97* UNESCO, Paris. PP 13 – 54. this document gives practical suggestions on how to involve the people in development.
15. Todaro M. (1977) *Economic Development in The Third World – 4th Edition* Longman, London. PP. 12 – 42. In this book the author makes an authoritative analysis of the economic development in the Third World and makes suggestions for growth.
16. UNESCO Op. cit. P. 34.

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