



International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare



ICMEC seminar 12 March 2019 UEL Docklands Campus Dr Katie E. Wright, Reader in International Development UEL Discussant notes

1. Contribution

- Penn's work offers a welcome and much needed critical perspective - arguing that a focus on early childhood intervention policies - in the ways that they are currently promoted by international donors - are not the panacea for global poverty reduction as is claimed.
- Her specific contribution to this area is in offering a critique of bold claims made by policy makers based on theorists such as Heckman that investment in early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education care (ECEC) *necessarily* leads to poverty alleviation.
- Penn achieves this by identifying disconnects between the economic policies pursued by agencies (such as the World Bank) to address global inequalities (e.g. growth agendas rather than redistribution agendas leading to the growth of market-driven privatised childcare provision with philanthropists and private school companies cashing in - e.g. in Africa - operating in ways that are largely unaccountable to their users). She argues that rather than enhancing the adequacy of the actual early years provision offered these kinds of policies risk undermining existing localised patterns of care (by dismantling state provision and opening the way in Africa for example for private companies to fill this space by charging high fees, with staff suffering low pay whilst the teaching methods are in practice of lower quality). Penn suggests implementation of these policies is also inadequate since it is often out of step with local practices on the ground, hence unlikely to reduce poverty and inequality and more likely to exacerbate it.
- This disconnect is examined across many different country contexts in her most recent book (including Zambia, Kenya, South Africa, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Mali, Cuba, Azerbaijan and India) which suggests that contemporary discourses of development that emphasize the "value" of social investment in the early years following a marketized approach destroys for example indigenous approaches to learning and care of young children.
- Her main proposition is to argue that attention needs to be refocused from the efficacy of early childcare provision to centering child rights and gender rights perspectives, building up local capacity whilst supporting governments to oversee, coordinate and monitor the adequacy of services in such a way to address the broader socio-economic inequalities and disparities that low-income groups face. More fundamentally this

requires privileging more equitable economic policies of redistribution over growth agendas combined with social protection mechanisms aimed at poverty reduction including cash transfers.

2. Methods

- Largely draws on qualitative approaches including for example focus groups with local community members, documented personal histories and ethnographic filming.

3. Implications

- Few of us here would argue - and as I've covered in class with my second year students present today - that slavish pursuit of economic growth agendas and neoliberalisation leads to trickle down that reduces poverty and inequality.
- However, equally in terms of criticisms made of the MDGs and SDGs agendas by Penn in her book, having had an ID guest lecture by Myles Wykstead CBE just last week, the evidence suggests that keeping global poverty alleviation goals centre stage on the political agenda is critical. Further, of these goals roll out of universal education (alongside reductions in maternal mortality) has been heralded as one of the areas of greatest success. Even if questions are rightly asked as to the quality of the education delivered, surely this at least represents some gains in terms of promoting more universal equality of opportunity to attend school and cannot simply be dismissed?
- Further, Penn follows Escobar in suggesting that engaging the private sector in developing aid finance (trillions of dollars) to ensure that the SDGs are met is at worst a symptom of imperialist and cultural domination and a gross misuse of power. However, could it not be argued that it is not a zero sum game and that the private sector may have *some* role to play – perhaps in generating capital rather than rolling out of services? To suggest they have no role at all might risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater?
- In keeping with other authors such as Hulme and Edwards in their book “Losing their Roots” Penn adopts the argument that NGOs have become profitable businesses accountable upwards to donors rather than to those that they claim to represent. Yet equally on the other hand it could also be argued that professionalization of NGOs is important not least for transparency and in order that aid should have more impact on poverty reduction. Similarly, the book portrays NGOs as “technocrats” and criticises the idea of bringing in “outside experts”. But surely there are instances when insider and outsider perspectives can together form the basis of good, timely and useful interventions and that rather than dismissed on purely ideological grounds lessons the focus should be on

learning lessons about “what works” from such efforts in order that good practice can be replicated and extended? Though Escobar (who Penn cites in her book) may rightly critique the tainted nature of the development industry, what real alternatives does he in turn provide?

- Similarly Penn takes issue with Heckman but is it not also the case that material and non-material transfers passed intergenerationally by mothers and fathers (or carers) to their children (e.g. such as norms, values and beliefs including delayed gratification or the need to privilege their education and study) might also act as a buffer to enable their offspring to exit poverty and inequality by choosing for example to remain in school (rather than exit it prematurely leading to downward mobility) and so have more chance at gaining access mainstream employment?
- Lastly, though Penn suggests that local values should be the heart of ECD provision, given the high incidence of for example, child marriage and prevailing social norms promoting this, are there not also problems in romanticising the values of local communities and cultural mores that are complicit in conferring lesser social status onto girls leading to the intergenerational transfer of poverty and inequality? Additionally if the emphasis is on developing indigenous resources, in most developing countries presumably where there is very little or inadequate early years formal provision are we not idealising low-income families who are highly reliant on already over stretched extended kinship networks to provide this?
- As a final thought, the question that beckons is what does good early years provision look like, how might it be provided in such a way that it is in keeping with local, social norms, needs and priorities whilst also promoting progressive social change?