De Gruchy and his holistic model of theology and development in South Africa and beyond

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This study reflects on Steve de Gruchy's holistic model of theology and development (T&D), emphasising his commitment to justice, human dignity and social transformation in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. De Gruchy was a notable South African theologian whose scholarship significantly influenced development theory, public theology and social ethics. This article is presented in response to the commemoration of 50 years of scholarship at the Research Institute of Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa, and the question is: How does De Gruchy's holistic model of T&D inform our understanding of socio-ecological, political and economic challenges in South Africa, and what implications does it have for development practices both locally and globally? This study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating theological analysis with development theory, drawing from De Gruchy's works and contextual examples. It examines the historical injustices in South Africa, critiques neoliberal economic paradigms and emphasises participatory frameworks for social change. Findings reveal that De Gruchy advocates for T&D that transcends economic metrics, highlighting ecological, social and spiritual dimensions. His emphasis on integrated approaches, such as the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, illustrates the necessity of empowering marginalised communities. The role of faith communities as catalysts for social change underscores the potential for constructive engagement between secular and religious sectors. This study is significant as it reiterates the relevance of De Gruchy's insights in addressing ongoing development challenges, advocating for a reconceptualisation of T&D that intertwines theory and praxis, promoting collaborative solutions in the African context and beyond.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article honours De Gruchy's lasting impact on contemporary T&D discourses and the Research Institute of Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa's 50 years of scholarship. His liberation theory of holistic development encourages theologians to address socio-ecological challenges, promoting ethical responses in South Africa and beyond. It bridges gaps with sociology and environmental science, fostering collaborative efforts for sustainable solutions.

Keywords: Steve de Gruchy; development theory; social justice; human dignity; freedom; participatory development; neoliberalism; sustainable livelihoods; church communities; faith communities; ethical engagement; community empowerment.

Introduction

Steve de Gruchy's insights into theology and development (T&D) possess a lasting impact because of their profound ability to intersect faith with social justice and human dignity. His recognition of the integral role of local agency and participatory processes set a transformative precedent, encouraging communities to take ownership of their development narratives. By situating his work within the socio-political realities of post-apartheid South Africa, he provided a framework that continues to inspire scholars and practitioners alike to confront systemic injustices and advocate for holistic development.

As a former student of De Gruchy, I am deeply grateful for his significant influence on our understanding of justice and ethics. His scholarship emerged against South Africa's historical injustices, pushing for a transformative vision of T&D that goes beyond mere economic growth. He emphasised the importance of addressing systemic injustices and uplifting marginalised communities through agency and community-driven solutions. On 14 March 2024, I had the honour of attending a memorial lecture at the University of KwaZulu Natal, where Rev Dr. Brian

Konkol, Dean of Hendricks Chapel and Professor of Practice in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, paid tribute to De Gruchy's profound impact on theology and social justice. Konkol's livestream lecture was on: 'Redemption Belongs: Theological Reflections on the Storytelling Songwriting of Steve de Gruchy'.

Steve de Gruchy's theory of T&D is deeply impactful in that it advocates for a liberative process that emphasises human dignity over mere economic metrics. His work critiques reductionist paradigms, encouraging an integrated, interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges local empowerment and community voices, particularly within the historical context of apartheid and social inequality. Central to De Gruchy's insights is the role of church and faith communities as vital agents of social change, promoting participatory development that amplifies marginalised voices. His foundational contributions to T&D can be distilled into eight key themes as:

- Human Agency in Modern Development Dynamics
- Education and Social Transformation in the Context of Social Inequalities
- Theological Foundations of T&D in post-repressive societies
- Interdisciplinary Approaches to Holistic Development
- Church's Role in Social Change
- African Religious Health Assets (RHAs) and Economic Reductionism
- A Critique of Neoliberal Development in Science and Humanities
- Local Mission Engagement and Contextualisation

De Gruchy's scholarship offers a paradigmatic framework for addressing contemporary social challenges through the lenses of justice, agency and sustainability. With T&D he redefines development as a liberative process that prioritises human dignity, critiquing reductionist paradigms and advocating for interdisciplinary perspectives, participatory engagement and marginalised voice amplification. His work underscores the necessity of local knowledge and community input in shaping effective solutions to complex social challenges.

Human agency in South Africa's modern development dynamics

De Gruchy's scholarship intricately intersects with South Africa's historical and socio-economic landscape, profoundly influenced by apartheid's legacy, systemic inequalities and widespread poverty. His theoretical framework proposes that development must extend beyond economic and technical indicators to encompass ethical, social and spiritual dimensions. A central tenet of his argument is that development should be understood as a liberative process rather than merely a path to economic enhancement. This paradigm resonates deeply with marginalised populations, for whom justice and human dignity are essential to any developmental initiative. De Gruchy encapsulates this idea: 'development is really a responsibility for those who are treated as objects, that they may become the subjects of

history' (De Gruchy 2012:480), emphasising a shift from technical metrics to a liberatory process that upholds human dignity.

Further, De Gruchy's examination of Protestant mission paradigms in the context of ecological crises offers a nuanced perspective on the complex challenges of T&D within South Africa and the broader African continent. He critiques the historically entrenched belief in unmitigated human agency rooted in Protestant mission thought, arguing that this perspective has contributed to various contemporary crises, including severe environmental degradation. He contends, 'Protestant mission thinking and action is wedded to the same affirmation of human agency that is itself the cause of the earth crisis' (De Gruchy 2006a:8), a critique echoed by Vischer (2006:n.p.), who highlights the difficult transition from acknowledging crisis to establishing new orientations. This underscores inadequacies in external interventions that often stem from a Western-centric understanding of agency and modernisation.

De Gruchy highlights a significant deficit within various Protestant traditions, which have generally failed to integrate ecological considerations into their mission frameworks. He critiques the Micah Declaration for promoting integral mission without recognising the intricate relationship between economic and ecological spheres (De Gruchy 2006a:2). This disconnect perpetuates environmental degradation, as economic exploitation, manifest through neo-colonial endeavours, mining and industrial agriculture, fuels cycles of poverty and social injustice that communities often find insurmountable.

A central aspect of De Gruchy's critique challenges the conception of human agency in mission work and development. He provocatively asks, 'Can we recognize that in its reliance upon human agency, the *missiones ecclesia* is itself subject to sin, and stands under judgement?' (De Gruchy 2006a:13). This inquiry calls for profound introspection concerning the motives behind T&D initiatives and their effects on impoverished communities. Given South Africa's historical injustices, development strategies must address not only the upliftment of marginalised populations but also the systemic issues that maintain socio-economic disparities.

De Gruchy introduces four themes namely on God's economy, God's grace, understanding sin and rethinking human agency (De Gruchy 2006a:12–14). With '*oikonomia tou Theou*' [God's economy], he introduces a holistic framework that integrates the Mission of God [*missio Dei*] and the Economy of God [*oikonomia tou Theou*], bridging the divine economy and human endeavour. De Gruchy (2006a) posits:

> If the *Missio Dei* can be related to the *oikonomia tou Theou* … then we possibly have a way of thinking about the *missiones ecclesia* [*church's mission*] in ways that can be earth-affirming. (p. 12)

The church's mission is a recognition of God's grace, an invitation into the deeper understanding of God's unexpected and historical actions in the world. It helps us to understand sin where the ecological crisis links human agency in view of cultural norms and economic practices. Thus, the pattern of human behaviour calls for mission to confront environmental degradation by addressing systemic issues. In this way, human agency needs to be rethought if human action can be positive in the world, which is missional praxis that is sensitive to human actions and environmental stewardship leading to sustainable and redemptive engagement with creation. This approach necessitates an integrated strategy that interlaces ecological stewardship with social justice and economic empowerment, particularly crucial within an African context facing significant ecological challenges.

Additionally, De Gruchy's engagement with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) provides essential insights for urban development in South Africa. He emphasises that 'development is a process, not a goal' (De Gruchy 2005:65), advocating for ongoing enhancement of life quality over a linear progression from impoverishment to affluence. The SLF recognises the interconnectedness of assets that individuals utilise for survival, presenting a more holistic approach to understanding poverty and livelihoods (De Gruchy 2005:66).

Central to his argument is the affirmation of the agency of the poor: 'the SL approach recognizes that poor and vulnerable people are agents in, rather than clients of, their development' (De Gruchy 2005:60). This emphasis on grassroots agency, alongside the acknowledgment of the vulnerability context, including 'shocks', 'trends' and 'seasonality' (De Gruchy 2005:60), is vital for crafting effective T&D strategies. Furthermore, De Gruchy elucidates the necessity of intertwining macro and micro development levels, asserting that local insights should inform overarching policy frameworks (De Gruchy 2005:67).

To this, De Gruchy calls for genuine transformation within South Africa's development landscape by recognising ecological integrity, historical legacies and the complex interplay of grace and agency. His framework advocates for an ethical and integrated approach, imperative for addressing the urgent imperatives of sustainability within the African ecological crisis today.

Exploring the intersection of state authority, local agency, social justice and historical inequalities in education for social transformation

De Gruchy's critical examination of T&D highlights the persistent tension between educational institutions and state governance in South Africa. He argues that development must move beyond mere economic appraisal to emphasise the crucial role of education in fostering both individual and communal transformation. As he poignantly asserts,

'Education is not merely a means to uplift individuals; it is a transformative tool that shapes the very fabric of society' (De Gruchy 2004:102). This statement encapsulates his belief in the centrality of educational initiatives for cultivating democratic values and social responsibility, positioning education as indispensable for sustainable development.

De Gruchy investigates state interference at the Tiger Kloof School, a symbol of progressive educational paradigms targeted by an increasingly authoritarian state. This tension mirrors broader ideological struggles, where centralised bureaucratic governance threatens authentic leadership and undermines local agency. His critique resonates throughout Africa, as nations contend with the competing demands of state control and community empowerment.

His reflections are deeply rooted in a South African narrative marked by historical injustices and entrenched socio-economic disparities, which linger beyond apartheid's formal conclusion. The dismantling of educational structures that promote holistic development not only signifies stagnation in achieving genuine social equity but also constitutes a crisis in the broader discourse on African development. De Gruchy argues, 'When the state prioritizes compliance over creativity, the unique needs of diverse communities are sidelined' (De Gruchy 2004:106). This observation reflects inherent tensions in development initiatives, where state-driven uniformity stifles local innovation crucial for meaningful progress.

De Gruchy's insights reach beyond South Africa, providing valuable perspectives on the continent, where educational systems frequently face similar obstacles. He underscores the necessity of 'inclusive dialogue' among educators, community leaders and policymakers, suggesting that development is not uniform but rather a collaborative effort that amplifies local voices (De Gruchy 2004:108). This approach challenges historical authoritarianism, advocating for a more democratic, grassroots-oriented model of leadership in African development.

Analysing the United Nations Millennium Declaration, De Gruchy posits that true development transcends economic growth and emphasises social change and empowerment of marginalised communities. He articulates the need for holistic societal transformation that improves the quality of life for all citizens, especially the disadvantaged (De Gruchy 2001:57). This foundational belief underscores the importance of development frameworks that incorporate social justice, equity and human rights at their core.

Central to De Gruchy's critique is his opposition to reductionist economic paradigms that equate development solely with GDP growth. He contends that such indicators fail to capture the essence of development, which fundamentally concerns enhancing human well-being (De Gruchy 2001:67). This critique holds particular significance in Africa, where poverty, inequality and social exclusion remain pressing issues despite sporadic economic growth, serving as

a cautionary tale against governance frameworks that prioritise economic metrics over holistic community development.

Furthermore, the South African experience under apartheid serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of exclusionary development practices. De Gruchy emphasises the enduring effects of these injustices on contemporary socio-economic inequalities (De Gruchy 2001:57–76), illuminating barriers to achieving the Millennium Declaration's objectives of poverty alleviation, educational access and healthcare provision. Addressing historical injustices and systemic inequalities becomes essential for attaining meaningful development outcomes.

De Gruchy advocates for initiatives that tackle the root causes of inequality within the development discourse, emphasising the need to confront structural injustices that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation (De Gruchy 2001:69). Recognising and dismantling these barriers is increasingly critical, particularly in light of global challenges like climate change, which disproportionately affect African nations, exacerbating vulnerabilities and hindering equitable progress.

Ultimately, De Gruchy's theory calls for a comprehensive re-examination of conventional development paradigms within South Africa and the broader African continent. By fostering a participatory framework that prioritises social justice and human rights, he urges future initiatives to uphold the dignity and agency of all citizens, facilitating a transformative vision that acknowledges historical injustices while promoting equity and sustainability.

His expansive insights propose development as a locally anchored, environmentally sustainable process driven by community engagement. Reflecting ethical imperatives within the Christian faith, De Gruchy advocates for transformative approaches crucial for reimagining relationships among state, civil society and marginalised communities within the multifaceted landscape of development. By forging these critical connections, he lays the foundation for a more equitable future, illuminating pathways towards genuine societal change.

Theological foundations of development: Liberation theology, preferential option for the poor and appreciative inquiry in the context of post-apartheid South Africa

Steve de Gruchy's theological framework presents a nuanced approach to development that draws heavily from liberation theology, emphasising the preferential option for the poor and positioning social transformation as a theological imperative. He asserts that 'the challenge is not merely to alleviate poverty but to address the systemic injustices that

create and perpetuate such conditions' (De Gruchy 2012:25), highlighting his commitment to rectifying the root causes of inequality, a perspective that distinguishes his theory from conventional development paradigms focused primarily on economic metrics while often sidelining social justice.

De Gruchy's framework is fundamentally influenced by liberation theology, which mandates that development initiatives must prioritise the poor. He contends that development should be transformative and equitable, aligning with the ethical orientations of practitioners in the field. Gustavo Gutiérrez supports this by stating, 'the preferential option for the poor is the heart of Christian faith' (Gutiérrez 2023:12). Scholars like Elizabeth A. Johnson further advocate for a theological commitment to justice as a vital element of development (Johnson 2007).

De Gruchy (2003b) elucidates the interconnectedness between theological frameworks and development practices, arguing that development must commence with an articulation of community agency, assets and aspirations. This is mirrored in Amartya Sen's assertion that true development expands 'human freedoms … [*because freedom*] … is a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness' (Sen 1996:18). Supported by the asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, this perspective emphasises mobilising local resources and capabilities, reframing communities as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries of external aid. Korten identifies People's Organizations (POs) as embodiments of community engagement that illustrate 'human commitment to the collective survival driven by a vision that transcends the behaviours conditioned by existing institutions and culture' (Korten 1990:105). De Gruchy asserts that leveraging intrinsic community assets, be it social, cultural or spiritual, can foster ownership and agency among locals (De Gruchy 2003:20–39), providing a significant counter-narrative to top-down models that have historically marginalised indigenous knowledge.

In the South African context, marked by profound socio-economic inequalities and historical injustices, De Gruchy stresses the importance of grounding development initiatives in the lived experiences of marginalised communities. He emphasises understanding the historical context of inequality in South Africa and asserts that any developmental approach must prioritise the people involved (De Gruchy 2003:36). This aligns with the broader discourse on decolonising development, calling for a critical examination of how global frameworks may perpetuate colonial legacies while silencing local voices.

Integrating theological reflections into development discourse, De Gruchy advocates for a moral and ethical framework to challenge prevailing assumptions about development and its goals. Theological perspectives facilitate exploration of values such as justice, compassion and stewardship, which resonate profoundly within South African society. Conceptualising development as a

theological endeavour prompts practitioners to engage in reflective contemplation regarding their motivations and the potential consequences of their actions, fostering a holistic approach prioritising human flourishing.

Central to De Gruchy's thesis is the practice of appreciation, which he argues can transform relational dynamics within communities. He notes that various approaches within the South African context have underscored 'the vital relationship between giving priority to the agency and assets of the poor' and how non-poor outsiders can engage with the poor in a mutually beneficial struggle for justice without compromising this agency (De Gruchy 2003:37). This suggests the need for environments where individuals actively recognise and celebrate the contributions of others, crucial for reinforcing social cohesion in a fragmented society like South Africa, where trust and collective capacity are essential in addressing local challenges.

De Gruchy's understanding of development advocates for reframing traditional models through an appreciation-oriented lens that values local agency, contextual awareness and theological ethics. His insights compel practitioners to reassess the foundational underpinnings of development, promoting a participatory and appreciative approach that aligns with the historical and cultural complexities of South Africa. This theological imperative, intertwined with an appreciation for local contributions, empowers grassroots communities and enhances the efficacy of collaborative initiatives aimed at sustainable development.

Further, De Gruchy proposes an expansive definition of development that transcends mere economic calculations, asserting that 'true development must speak to the holistic needs of the community' (De Gruchy 2006b:85). This perspective coincides with the African philosophical underpinning of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness and collective well-being. De Gruchy underscores the importance of participatory development processes, insisting that 'community members must be involved in defining their own needs and aspirations' (De Gruchy 2006b:83). Engaging individuals in deliberative discourse ensures that development initiatives reflect the authentic realities of the communities they aim to serve, shifting engagement from paternalistic models to more inclusive and transformative practices.

The interplay among social, economic and spiritual dimensions of development is pivotal in De Gruchy's work. He observes that 'spiritual renewal can lead to social transformation' (De Gruchy 2006b:88), positing the church as a change agent that can catalyse aspirations for a more just and equitable future. This notion reinforces the idea that development is not solely about material gain; it encompasses human dignity and existential flourishing. Thus, the church functions as a locus of social capital, mobilising necessary resources and reinforcing communal identity to foster resilience in the face of adversity.

Interdisciplinary approaches to the theory and practice of holistic development

Steve de Gruchy established the necessity for an interdisciplinary framework in addressing development issues, asserting that development cannot be comprehended or improved through a singular lens. Synthesis of disciplines such as economics, sociology and theology is essential to grasp the complexities of human life and societal dynamics. This multi-faceted perspective encourages practitioners to explore the interconnections between various factors contributing to social welfare, thereby fostering more effective solutions for poverty and inequality. As De Gruchy noted, 'Understanding development requires an array of perspectives from sociology, economics, and theology' (De Gruchy 2012:42). This call for comprehensive engagement has significant implications for policy design and implementation, promoting cross-sector collaboration to tackle systemic challenges.

De Gruchy's interdisciplinary approach emphasises the interconnectedness of economic, social, political and ecological elements in development. He argued that poverty and inequality are not merely products of economic neglect but are embedded in social and political contexts that cannot be overlooked. By advocating for an integrated approach, he contended that addressing systemic challenges requires engagement with diverse academic and practical disciplines. For instance, economic policies must align with social justice imperatives and environmental sustainability to produce meaningful results. As David Korten states, 'No single discipline can address the multifaceted nature of poverty' (Korten 2008:98). This interdisciplinary perspective also stresses ecological considerations, underscoring the need for economic initiatives that do not compromise environmental integrity.

A hallmark of De Gruchy's interdisciplinary advocacy is his emphasis on bridging theory and practice. He argued that integrating diverse fields should inform practical methodologies in development interventions. By encouraging collaboration among academics, practitioners and community members, De Gruchy proposed that development work could evolve toward participatory and context-sensitive approaches. His insistence on reflexive practice highlights the need for development professionals to apply theoretical knowledge while engaging in iterative feedback loops with local communities to ensure that interventions remain relevant. This synergy has the potential to yield transformative outcomes when grassroots insights complement formal academic frameworks.

De Gruchy also emphasised the importance of contextualising development discourses within specific socio-political and historical realities. His critique of traditional development paradigms illustrates the necessity for practitioners to recognise and engage local contexts when designing effective

strategies. An interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced understanding that global practices may not universally apply and often risk imposing external frameworks on local realities. By drawing on multiple disciplines, practitioners can tailor interventions that resonate with communities' cultural, social and economic fabrics, promoting sustainable and equitable outcomes.

In advocating for an interdisciplinary approach, De Gruchy recognised collaborative knowledge production as vital for development. He envisioned a landscape where diverse voices, including academic, local and affected populations, converge to address development challenges. In this collaborative environment, insights from theology could introduce moral imperatives, while social sciences could ground discussions in empirical realities. This synergy would facilitate the creation of frameworks capable of addressing the complexities of human experience in development settings, ultimately leading to transformations that are both just and sustainable.

In all, Steve de Gruchy's perspectives on an interdisciplinary approach highlight the essential integration of diverse academic and practical fields. His advocacy for collaborative methodologies, context-focused strategies and recognition of interdependencies among societal factors enhance the understanding and response to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social injustice. The call for holistic engagement in development is not merely a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity that remains highly relevant in contemporary discourse.

The church's role in social change: Leveraging relationships, health assets and religious networks for holistic development

The intersection of religion and health has gained prominence in T&D discourse, particularly in Africa. Steve de Gruchy's contributions highlight the essential role of churches and faith communities in advocating for justice, health and well-being. His framework positions these entities as pivotal players in transformative social processes, detailing their multifaceted contributions to health promotion.

De Gruchy argues that the church acts as a catalyst for social change, engaging in advocacy for justice and human dignity. He asserts, 'The church is called to be a part of the transformative processes in society, becoming a voice for the voiceless and a champion for justice' (De Gruchy 2012:75). This notion underscores the need for theological education to empower congregants to confront systemic injustices, illustrating the intrinsic connections between faith and social activism. Similarly, theologian Walter Brueggemann emphasises that faith communities must navigate their roles as agents of social justice, discerning and resisting oppressive structures (Brueggemann 2012). This integrative approach

highlights the critical importance of community engagement in advancing development agendas.

De Gruchy's analysis illuminates the expanding role of religious entities in promoting health and well-being across Africa, indicating a growing acknowledgement of RHAs. He notes, 'Since the mid-1990s, there has been a dramatic proliferation of the number of religious entities involved in promoting health and well-being' (De Gruchy 2007c:18). This underscores a paradigm shift in recognising the intersectional influence of religion on health initiatives. He emphasises that these entities are crucial in integrating spiritual and material dimensions of healthcare, stating, 'The strength of religion and REs lies in the integration of these two elements' (De Gruchy 2007c:18). This requires holistic approaches that blend spiritual encouragement with practical interventions such as compassionate care and material support.

A critical element of De Gruchy's framework is the emphasis on relationships and social networks as foundational to health and well-being. He argues that 'healthy relationships constitute the basis of life and well-being', explaining that 'good relationships are built on trust' (De Gruchy 2007c:20). This observation highlights the role of social capital in driving successful T&D initiatives, especially in rural contexts where formal healthcare may falter. The robust networks facilitated by religious organisations provide invaluable community support, enhancing health outcomes. Development strategies must therefore leverage these existing social structures to foster engagement through faith-based entities.

De Gruchy explores the interplay between health experiences and cultural beliefs, positing that perceptions of health are framed within broader socio-cultural contexts. He asserts that 'the struggle for health and well-being is located within a health world' (De Gruchy 2007c:21) shaped by prevailing beliefs and norms. Recognising religion as 'an integral dimension of perceptions and experiences of health and well-being' (De Gruchy 2007c:21), he underscores the necessity for development practitioners to honour local belief systems. By tailoring health interventions to resonate with cultural and spiritual realities, professionals can ensure greater efficacy and acceptance of health initiatives. This navigation of religious and traditional healing practices offers opportunities for meaningful collaboration that respects diverse health paradigms, ultimately leading to more comprehensive strategies.

Given the complex interplay between public health and religious practice, De Gruchy advocates for respectful dialogue and collaboration between these sectors. He urges recognition of the 'ubiquity of religion in African health-worlds' (De Gruchy 2007b:8), highlighting a prevalent barrier within public health that often overlooks religion's significance in shaping health perceptions. Cultivating mutual appreciation for converging goals between public health and religious aspirations is fundamental. Notably, his

observations of a generational shift among younger religious leaders, who acknowledge the substantial role of religious entities in pursuing African well-being, indicate promising avenues for collaborative action (De Gruchy 2007b:8).

However, navigating these dialogues entails a willingness from both sectors to 'translate the concepts' (De Gruchy 2007b:9) inherent to their practices. This mutual understanding requires articulating terminologies in accessible frameworks to foster collaboration rather than conflict. Additionally, acknowledging historical contexts, particularly lessons from past medical missionary endeavours, is critical in effectively intertwining public health and religious initiatives today. As De Gruchy points out, 'the training we are giving at schools of religion and schools of health are equipping new scholars' (De Gruchy 2007b:10), ensuring that future leaders adeptly bridge divides between these crucial spheres.

De Gruchy's insights into the nexus of faith communities and health underscore the necessity of integrating diverse well-being dimensions within development paradigms. His call for 'forging common solidarity' (De Gruchy 2007b:11) encapsulates the transformative potential of collaborative efforts between religious entities and public health actors. By fostering intersectoral partnerships grounded in mutual respect and understanding, development can transcend mere economic measures, addressing the intricate interactions of human dignity, spirituality and community support. True development entails not only mitigating health crises but promoting holistic enrichment that resonates with communities' cultural and social fabrics. De Gruchy's emphasis on engaged, participatory approaches underscores the imperative for transformative change, instilling hope for a just and equitable future in African contexts.

Exploring religious health assets and networks in Africa: An intersectional approach to economic reductionism and agency

Steve de Gruchy advocates for participatory development as a transformative paradigm, critiquing the top-down approaches prevalent in international development, particularly in the South African context. He emphasises the intrinsic need for local communities to engage in decision-making processes impacting their lives. De Gruchy asserts that 'when individuals articulate their needs, the resulting development is contextually relevant' (De Gruchy 2012:93). This perspective diverges from donor-driven models that often marginalise local voices, promoting a development ethos that values local knowledge and priorities.

Echoing this sentiment, Mahbub ul Haq claims that 'development is ultimately about people, not about economic growth' (Ul Haq 1995:66). Such participatory frameworks reposition agency among communities, countering the negative impacts of traditional developmental narratives focused on external measures of progress.

Central to De Gruchy's vision is the Participatory Inquiry into Religious Health Assets, Networks, and Agency (PIRHANA), which critically examines the intersection of religion and health within the African development narrative. He emphasises that 'mapping RHAs and trying to understand how they function must thus begin, first, with ordinary people in local communities' (De Gruchy et al. 2011:46), facilitating an epistemological shift towards the experiences of marginalised groups. This approach refines how social dynamics are understood in communities facing health crises, ensuring that participatory methodologies genuinely respect and empower those involved.

Participatory Inquiry into Religious Health Assets, Networks, and Agency initiatives in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi exemplify the necessity of incorporating local voices in developmental initiatives. By harnessing local knowledge and amplifying the 'wisdom of ordinary people' (De Gruchy et al. 2011:46), the approach aims to utilise existing RHAs to foster community resilience. De Gruchy notes that 'participatory richness has noteworthy kick-on effects in bringing key actors together around common concerns' (De Gruchy et al. 2011:46), highlighting the potential for community mobilisation through participatory frameworks.

De Gruchy critiques the reductionist Western paradigms that narrowly equate development with economic growth, declaring that 'to reduce development to economic growth alone is to ignore the richness of human experience' (De Gruchy 1997:59), which risks overlooking essential dimensions of human flourishing. This critique underscores the need to integrate social cohesion, cultural integrity and environmental sustainability within development frameworks.

He introduces the concept of 'integral development', which embodies social, economic, cultural and spiritual dimensions, resonating deeply with the African philosophy of Ubuntu. This philosophy frames development as relational rather than transactional, highlighting community interconnectedness and mutual support as pivotal in African societies.

The historical injustices of apartheid significantly shape the South African sociopolitical landscape, and De Gruchy positions development to address these enduring scars. He insists that 'for development to be meaningful, it must contribute to the healing of past wounds and promote social justice'. This emphasis on a reparative approach signifies the necessity of centring the legacy of oppression in any developmental endeavour.

The urgent need for a justice-oriented developmental framework emerges, as the struggle for equitable resource distribution and socio-political reconciliation underpins the sustainability of development initiatives in South Africa (Lutheran World Federation 2014). De Gruchy warns against adopting a monolithic perspective on African development, asserting that 'Africa is not a singular entity; it encompasses a multitude of identities and narratives' (De Gruchy 1997:60).

In examining De Gruchy's contributions, Gathogo critiques the interplay between T&D, positioning De Gruchy's T&D model as a vital contribution to post-colonial African discourse. Gathogo articulates, 'Theology and Development are two sides of the same coin' (Gathogo 2019:308), suggesting that theological reflection can meaningfully inform development practices. This harmony asserts the relevance of De Gruchy's T&D model in addressing contemporary challenges such as health disparities, poverty and environmental degradation.

Gathogo acknowledges the comprehensive nature of De Gruchy's T&D framework in navigating the complexities of African societies, transcending simplistic binaries in development discourse. He notes a shared alignment with the African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR) regarding the need for societal reconstruction to confront the remnants of colonial exploitation and ongoing socio-economic disparities. This commitment to fostering inclusivity and community-driven approaches solidifies De Gruchy's paradigm shift in conceptualising robust development strategies applicable throughout the African continent.

In all, insights from De Gruchy and Gathogo present a compelling case for re-envisioning development frameworks that are participatory, contextually aware, and attuned to the lived experiences of local communities. This multifaceted approach advocates for an engaged discourse on T&D that transcends traditional deficit-oriented paradigms, fostering a deeper understanding of sustainable, meaningful growth in the African context.

Neoliberal development: Biotechnology, social justice, ecology and community engagement

Steve de Gruchy critiques neoliberal development models, highlighting a fundamental dissonance between economic frameworks and social equity. He argues that neoliberal policies, which prioritise market-driven solutions and exponential growth, often undermine the social fabric essential for genuine development, stating, 'Neoliberalism, by its very nature, undermines the social fabric necessary for true development, reducing human beings to mere economic units' (De Gruchy 2007a:4). His perspective necessitates alternative paradigms that prioritise human dignity and well-being over profit maximisation, aligning with scholars like David Harvey, who contend such frameworks perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities and erode democratic processes (Harvey 2007).

De Gruchy proposes an 'olive agenda', advocating for an integrated approach that reconciles the historical dichotomy between environmental (green) and socio-economic (brown) agendas. He argues that isolating these domains leads to significant failures in sustainable development, particularly in Africa, where economic progress often accompanies ecological degradation. He notes, 'while both are fundamentally right, taken in isolation from the other, each is tragically wrong' (De Gruchy 2007a:4). This critique challenges traditional development assumptions, proposing that the ecological crisis and poverty are inextricably linked. He asserts that reliance on the 'Big Economy' to address poverty while ensuring environmental security is ethically questionable and theologically indefensible (De Gruchy 2007a:4). Such reconceptualisation is especially pertinent in Africa, where communities face both persistent poverty and ecological degradation.

De Gruchy emphasises the interconnectedness of economic and ecological systems, calling for 'eco/nomics' as a vital development strategy. He argues that addressing poverty requires environmental sustainability, asserting, 'if we don't recognize that the laws of economics and the laws of ecology are finally the same laws, we are in deep doodoo' (De Gruchy 2007a:5). This urgency resonates with Nürnberger, who warns of the consequences of unchecked industrial growth and environmental degradation (Nürnberger 1999:72). De Gruchy's insights align with a growing number of African scholars advocating for developmental frameworks that diverge from exploitative practices characteristic of Global North paradigms.

Central to De Gruchy's olive metaphor is food sovereignty, integral to addressing the experiences of marginalised communities. He argues that the most profound poverty crisis is not merely financial but stems from a lack of control over food systems, contending, 'the deepest crisis of poverty is not a lack of money, but hunger caused by a lack of control of food' (De Gruchy 2007a:8). This underscores the necessity of grassroots engagement within development strategies. By centring local knowledge and practices, communities can cultivate resilience against systemic inequities. The olive symbolises collective strength and sustainability, transcending cultural and religious divides, embodying an ethos of cooperative development.

De Gruchy critiques the imposition of biotechnological solutions in agriculture, deeming them a 'cultural invasion' that undermines local agricultural practices. He asserts that combating hunger is entwined with the struggle for control over agricultural resources, particularly seeds, noting, '[t]he major part of the issue of feeding the hungry today is centred […] in the struggle for the control of seed' (De Gruchy 2003a:83). Drawing on Paulo Freire's concepts of dialogical and anti-dialogical action, he critiques dominant development paradigms for neglecting local contexts and failing to engage in genuine dialogue with communities. This imposition obscures the complexities of African agricultural systems. De Gruchy distinguishes 'food security' as framed by corporations from 'food sovereignty', emphasising the importance of community control over food systems (De Gruchy 2003a:92–93).

In a compelling critique of the biotechnological industry, he elucidates how corporations, masquerading as benevolent

actors, prioritise profit over local needs. He asserts that sustainable solutions must emerge from within communities, highlighting the ethical imperative to support local agricultural practices.

De Gruchy further examines the intersection of theological education and social development, emphasising the political dimensions of curriculum design. He notes that creating a curriculum in T&D is inherently political, reflecting pressing social realities. He discusses the transition from resistance to collaboration with democratically elected authorities in post-apartheid South Africa, stressing the importance of responsive theological education (De Gruchy 2003b:452–454).

Advocating for an integrative approach to theological curriculum design, he posits that intersections among missiology, social ethics and practical theology are vital for creating a responsive educational framework. De Gruchy argues that the church must critically engage with justice, power and economic theory in addressing societal issues (De Gruchy 2003b:456). This emphasis on praxis promotes dialogical education, fostering active participation among students in their development (De Gruchy 2003b:463).

In sum, through a multifaceted critique of neoliberal development models, De Gruchy illuminates the need for frameworks prioritising sustainability, social equity and local agency. His insights challenge us to rethink development paradigms to effectively address the critical challenges faced by vulnerable communities, ultimately advocating for a holistic approach that harmonises human and ecological welfare.

Local mission engagement and contextualisation in Africa: Perspectives on agency and hermeneutics

The evolving discourse on Christian mission in contemporary Africa necessitates a critical examination of Steve de Gruchy's pioneering work, particularly within post-colonial theological engagements. De Gruchy (2009) argues for a transformative shift in missionary practice from Northern-centric paradigms of Western missionary societies to a decentralised, Southern-oriented understanding that deeply values local interpretations of Scripture. The translation and dissemination of the Bible in vernacular languages, such as Setswana, initiated a reconfiguration of mission that emphasises indigenous agency and holistic engagement with cultural identity. As De Gruchy notes, 'the Kurumans of the world are now teaching London about mission' (2009:50), exemplifying how historically marginalised voices from the Global South challenge entrenched hegemonies and contribute significantly to theological discourse.

De Gruchy introduces the concept of 'hermeneutical circulation' (2009:50), which describes the dynamic interplay between Scripture and missional practice, positing that each continually informs and reshapes the other. Local translations of biblical texts foster environments conducive to re-interpretation and communal ownership of faith, empowering indigenous communities to engage with Christian doctrine from a Southern perspective. This transformative engagement reframes mission conceptualisation, aligning it with contemporary issues like social justice and reconciliation. Documentation from the Council for World Mission (CWM) reflects this shift: 'to spread the knowledge of Christ throughout the world' now must also encompass 'demonstrating his love to the poor' and 'working for reconciliation within all communities' (De Gruchy 2009:54). Such assertions foreground a 'mission-ological approach' that transcends mere evangelism, embedding solidarity with the marginalised within its foundational discourse.

Gerald O. West's reflections on De Gruchy further illuminate the interplay between theology and social development in Africa. West highlights the agency of African communities as vital in redefining theological discourse, supporting the assertion that 'the flowering of Christian activity in modern Africa has taken place in ground suitably worked by vernacular translation' (West 2016:1). By localising biblical texts, African populations reclaim authority over their spiritual and sociopolitical narratives. West echoes De Gruchy's claim that 'the availability of the Bible in the languages of the South leads to new ways of reading the Bible and understanding mission' (West 2016:11), suggesting that such translations activate critical dialogues responsive to the lived realities of African people.

West critiques the limitations of missionary endeavours by figures like Robert Moffat, whose translation efforts, despite increasing Scripture accessibility, inadequately engaged diverse local voices. This led to a homogenisation of the Gospel, insufficient to encapsulate the plurality of African experiences. The assertion that 'the Bible does not have a singular monovocal message' (West 2016:11) reinforces the need for development frameworks that embrace multiplicity, acknowledging the diverse narratives within African contexts. This multifaceted approach underscores the imperative to recognise the intrinsic capacities of African communities in development discussions.

Synthesising De Gruchy's and West's insights results in a conception of the Bible that transcends its function as a mere religious text; it emerges as a dynamic instrument for socio-political emancipation. Through localised interpretations, the biblical narrative fosters meaningful dialogue and critique, facilitating a deeper understanding of development that resonates profoundly with the African identity and agency. This, in turn, contributes to a more inclusive and compassionate theological landscape, positioning the African voice as central in the reimagined mission of the Church in the Global South.

Conclusion

Steve de Gruchy's profound contributions to development theory in South Africa underscore a transformative approach

rooted in justice, human dignity and ethical engagement. His emphasis on the intersections of T&D, the significance of participatory methodologies and critical critiques of dominant economic paradigms offers essential frameworks for navigating contemporary developmental challenges. De Gruchy's insights advocate for a development approach that prioritises local agency, social justice and holistic well-being, making them invaluable for practitioners seeking to address the complexities of inequality and poverty. As South Africa and the broader African continent continue to grapple with these issues, De Gruchy's legacy remains a guiding beacon for crafting meaningful, just and sustainable pathways toward a more equitable future.

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