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COMMENTARY

NOW THAT WE KNOW WHERE THE BODIES ARE BURIED, WHO DO WE TELL?

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ABSTRACT

Although the past fifty years have seen substantial progress on a number of fronts, it is hard to claim that development has been successful for the majority of the world's poorer people. Development's failure largely has been due to the failure of our development industry to learn from experience. Yet anthropologists, among other professionals, have learned a great deal of value. The problem is that ready-made constituencies, sensitive to development practice and development outcomes, do not exist. This commentary examines why institutional learning within the development industry has been so difficult. Several paradigms are examined. Lack of fit and lack of context, not lack of information, is central to the problem. Engagement of the public at large, as well as a focused agenda for reform, are central to the solution.

KEY WORDS: development, institutional learning, industry reform

INTRODUCTION: WHY AREN'T WE DOING BETTER?

Development is humanity's first global project, carrying enormous risk as well as high promise. Our early optimism that everyone could live a decent life, and that this would not take very long to achieve, now looks naïve, and—to some—hopeless. Although the past fifty years have seen substantial progress on a number of fronts, it's hard to claim that development—however defined—has been successful for the majority of the world's poorer people. Disparities between rich and poor have continued to grow, and today, poverty and inequality have become virtually institutionalized across entire regions of the world. In some places, warfare and crime—often indistinguishable from each other—have pushed development priorities off the table altogether, as people battle for dominance or simple survival. In addition to disappointing tangible results, we also face an intellectual crisis in development, as the dominant paradigms begin to show their weaknesses and limitations. Development's failure has been, by and large, due to the failure of our development industry to learn from experience.

But within that industry, certain groups, anthropologists prominent among them, have learned a great deal. The problem is that there is no one to tell; there is no ready-made constituency for development which could take what we know and use it to effect the reforms in development practice that we so desperately need. This commentary examines why institutional learning within the development industry is so difficult, and what anthropologists need to do about it if we are ever to have an impact on changing the way development is done.

A FAILURE OF LEARNING

If we look closely at development failures, we see that most of the time, these are not due to a lack of money, technology, energy, or good will, but rather to a simple lack of fit between what was attempted and the local cultural context in which it was tried.[1] And this is a persistent problem: criticisms of development work have an almost timeless quality. The same things that are wrong today were wrong twenty and thirty years ago.

Whatever else it may be, development is a cross-cultural encounter. And so our failure in development is, at base, a failure—on the part of the large development agencies which direct and control, for the most part, the process—to learn cross-culturally. Why, then, do agencies not learn better? Essentially, development agencies do not learn because they do not have to learn. And since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this problem has become worse, not better.[2]

There are three broad reasons for this organizational inability to learn: the *technicist paradigm* which dominates development work, the scripts or *development narratives* that this paradigm generates, and the *collusive structures* into which the development partners seem to be locked.

The Technicist Paradigm

The technicist mindset, derived from economics, engineering, and finance, could be called the behaviorism of the development enterprise.[3] It is quantitative, reductionist, deductive, and prescriptive. The approach tends to define reality in advance of investigation, thereby rendering new information irrelevant. Local data, in this view, tend to con-

taminate and destroy the simplicity of the existing models, and so are avoided whenever possible. Things which cannot be counted, or whose significance is unclear, tend to be ignored or downplayed. What the specialists do not know, in short, is considered not worth knowing.

Perhaps the worst thing about the technicist paradigm is that so-called experts can develop both theory and plans without ever having to learn very much about what ordinary people are actually like.

Development Narratives

The technicist approach tends to reduce complex situations to the policy equivalent of sound-bites, which have been termed "development narratives"—stories or scripts about why the developing world is the way it is.[4] Development narratives help us to smooth out the complex messiness of reality into neater, simpler patterns, turning uncertainty and ambiguity into clarity. The "tragedy of the commons" is one such development narrative. The notion of the "noble savage" is another, as is the "tradition-bound peasant." Like fairy tales, development narratives draw our attention to what some people, at least, consider salient aspects of our world. But they also enable us to avoid directly encountering the other cultural worlds in a development situation.

Narratives arise and prosper partly because they are a way for experts to claim ownership of the development conversation. If a narrative becomes elevated to the status of an axiom, or theoretical orthodoxy, planners then have little need to go into the field where they might encounter discrepant and varied patterns of data.

Structures of Collusion

The structure and operation of the development industry also constitutes a formidable barrier to learning. Large development agencies operate under relentless pressure to do two things: spend money and show results. But they do very little direct development work themselves. Instead, they employ contractors to plan and carry out projects and programs. Agencies, contractors, and host governments are locked into an essentially symbiotic arrangement where each depends on the other. Within this arrangement, no partner has an interest in upsetting the operation of the money pipeline.

There is thus a collusive web of relationships linking agencies (and their oversight bodies), host country governments, and contract specialists together. Each member of the network has an interest in communicating some types of information, but not others, to their partners. I'll return to this point in a moment.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND LEARNING

Institutions haven't learned much about how to do development, but individuals certainly have. And prominent among these individuals are the anthropologists who have been working for decades as project designers, managers, trainers, evaluators, and community advocates, across the world. Anthropologists are very good at doing development work, in fact. There are some specific reasons why this is so. Anthropologists are not only trained to discover the different cultural worlds that people inhabit, but also to make these worlds intelligible to the rest of us. Inductive and firmly grounded in reality, anthropology does its work through a process of discovery rather than one of verification of theory.

In essence, anthropologists learn about context: the social and physical environment in which plans unfold and develop. It is context—the conditions and factors which aren't immediately obvious to the rural development tourists—which will ultimately determine the success or failure of development efforts.[5] As fifty years of experience have shown, development efforts which fit with their context will usually work, while those which disregard it will usually fail, sooner or later. Anthropologists are particularly well-equipped to examine the context in which development projects develop, to uncover and examine how plans interact with context to produce outcomes.

Development anthropologists have been doing this for years. Although there have been, on balance, more failures than successes, there have been some outstanding successes. And failure, as any investigator will tell you, often teaches us far more than success. A colleague of mine at the World Bank has a small plaque on his desk. "Good judgment comes from experience," it reads. "Experience comes from bad judgment."

Development anthropology has truly come of age. We are sought after in development work for our skills. Many of us have risen to important positions within the industry. We have acquired a wealth of immensely practical knowledge about what will work and what will not work in development. We have a very deep understanding, based on long experience, of why the development industry doesn't do better, and what needs to change.

So what, after all this time, have we learned? In the broadest sense, we have learned two extremely important things, which are closely connected with one another. First, we now know a great deal about how local contexts figure in determining the course of development efforts. Second, we now know in detail how the development industry works, and specifically, how it works or fails to work with local contexts to produce the largely disappointing outcomes that we see around us.

WHO CAN WE TELL?

This information is extremely valuable, obviously. The problem is, however, that we have no one to tell. There is no natural constituency for either foreign aid or international development. People in Third World countries don't

vote in American elections. The special interests—the agencies, the legislatures, the consulting firms, and the university institutes and centers which receive large grants—all benefit from the way things are now. They are not really interested in hearing things the effect of which would be to question, undermine, and otherwise upset the status quo.

Let me qualify that. There are indeed groups in the US who would be very interested in "knowing where the bodies are buried," but only because they would then use this information to scuttle the entire enterprise. Every development anthropologist I know has agonized at one time or another over how much to tell, and to whom. We all suffer from what one writer called the "guilty knowledge/dirty hands" syndrome, whereby we have been participants and accomplices in activities which, if publicly known, would cause someone, somewhere, a great deal of trouble.[6]

We know that there is strong support for some form of international assistance among the public at large.[7] We also know, however, that this is coupled with a strong bias against government. We therefore face a fundamental dilemma. If we talk frankly and fully about what we know about how things work now, we may horrify the public on whose support the effort to reform development ultimately depends. If we say nothing, of course, then little will change.

Keeping silent is not an option. But we need, as a profession, to find an appropriate way to tell the public at large what we know, in order to marshal support for change in development procedures. Such changes will have to be far-reaching to have any real effect on outcomes. Our problems are structural and systemic, and will require a major overhaul in the development industry, at all levels.

Within the current pattern of relationships, players have little incentive to either learn or change, and few mechanisms for converting what is learned into better planning. Few agencies directly experience the effects of their plans, projects, and programs. Their internal operations, largely opaque to outsiders, are not particularly disposed to self-criticism or the discussion of failure. Agencies tend to be preoccupied with moving money down the aid pipeline, and bad news tends to impede the flow. Success, for most agencies, means disbursing the maximum amount of money with a minimum of problems.

Much of development work today is almost a monopsony situation: a market in which the product or service of several sellers is sought by only one buyer. What of the NGOs, however? What of the various groups which have arisen in opposition to the influence of the large agencies? First, they simply have nowhere near the power and influence of the larger agencies. Second, because they define themselves in opposition, they tend for the most part to pre-

sent a version of development reality which serves their own needs, and not necessarily those of the world's poor.

What constituency we have for aid and development is actually not a constituency at all, but a series of interconnected gatekeepers, "interpreters of poverty" if you will. And it is good to remember the definition of an interpreter: someone who helps two groups understand each other by repeating to each what it would have been to the interpreter's advantage for the other to have said.[8] The broadcast media, of course, merely compound the problem, in part because of the technical limitations of television, which tends toward the high-contrast, dramatic, short, and shallow, and the proclivities of today's journalists themselves, who only seem interested in people far away if they are starving or killing each other.

Although individuals and project teams actually accumulate a great deal of useful information about what works in development, most of this never finds its way into the system. Reports from the field which would threaten the smooth operation of the pipeline are carefully sanitized and shaped, put into their "proper" context. Failure is rarely discussed, and therefore, opportunities to learn from failure are rare. Often, completed projects are by definition successful ones, since they pave the way for more projects—and more funding.

In these and other ways, the large agencies operate to define development norms and meanings. One consequence of this is that until a development problem, issue, opportunity, or concept has been noticed by the large agencies, it does not really exist. And once it is officially mentioned, it becomes, as it were, the property of the development industry.[9] There are, in other words, few "learning moments" in development work.

CONCLUSION: THE WAY AHEAD

The greatest danger is that we will simply continue as before. But as we all know, if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten.

"The answer cannot be more of the same. And the answer is surely more than simply hoping for the best, more than vague ideas about 'strengthening over time the institutional forms and activities associated with global society'. Simplistic exhortations to 'accelerate the transfer of technology' after decades of disastrous technology transfer, are not only counter-productive, they are (and here, the percussion) stupid." [Smillie 1995: 245, emphasis in the original]

Let me present, therefore, a simple agenda, or framework, for development anthropology in this decade.

Internal Reform of the Industry

Players in the development game are locked today into a self-reinforcing system which is neither transparent nor ame-

nable to democratic control, but which monopolizes financial and intellectual resources for development. We need to make common cause with others to force fundamental reform of the development industry. Reform efforts can take many forms, from confrontation and subversion on the one hand, to co-optation and collaboration on the other. Years ago, Laura Nader urged us to "study up"—today, we also need to "move up" into key positions in the industry, and in the political structures to which it responds.

As anthropologists become more influential in the industry, they need a broad but focused agenda for reform. This should include three key components: *accountability, incentives,* and *mechanisms for learning*. The most critical of these, of course, is an organization's ability to learn from experience. Unless development agencies are able to find better ways to do this, very little in the way of improved outcomes can be expected.

Internal Reform of Anthropology

While some of us work to reform the development industry, others must reform anthropology.[10] In particular, we need to confront the still-prevalent attitude within the academy that applied work is somehow a lesser calling, ethically suspect, and unworthy of our intellect, passion, energy and creativity.[11]

Generating Better Information

We also need to connect the academy to the field through the production of more and better development ethnographies—detailed analyses of how and why we get the results we do. We have not done a particularly good job of documenting how, for a particular project, day-to-day decisions are made, and how interactions between stakeholders produce, over time, specific outcomes. The academy has been largely indifferent to this type of study, preferring to encourage its students to pursue other, more traditional, forms of enquiry. Field practitioners, on the other hand, have neither the time nor indeed, the freedom to do such work.

Finding Our Public Voice and Telling Our Story

A society's institutions, as Mary Douglas reminds us, shape the way we think about problems, and—more importantly—about solutions to those problems (cited in Gudeman 1984). Our institutions help organize our public memory and shape our public imagination. In important ways, the institutional forms and cultures which we have allowed to evolve for development purposes function today not only as important obstacles to effective development, but to our very understanding of what effective development might be.

Slowly and painfully, a new paradigm is emerging in development work, and it will take form with or without help from anthropologists. But how much better it would be if we could clear our collective throats, marshal our thoughts, and join the public dialogue on where development goes from here, and how. We cannot simply assume, as we have in the past, that good information will carry all before it; that others will automatically understand what we are talking about; and that they will know what to do. We have not had a strong public voice for some time, and there is scant evidence that the discipline views popularizers any differently than it has in the past. But the broad outline of the new development paradigm now emerging is one with which anthropology is already familiar, and where it can lead, rather than follow. One of the most interesting aspects of the new paradigm is that it is not really about the Third World at all, but about all of us, and how we are connected, now and into the future, through a set of interwoven issues.

FINALLY. . .

Today, we are headed into a world characterized by a few hugely wealthy countries surrounded by a sea of poorer, overpopulated ones. Does anyone reading this doubt that such an arrangement will be temporary? At the same time, is anyone absolutely certain that we can solve problems of poverty while at the same time preserving the richness and integrity of the world's diverse cultures? Or will we, so to speak, wind up destroying the village in our attempt to save it?

For reasons which have been evident for some time—and today more than ever—we need to re-launch the development effort. But this time, we need to do it right. What anthropologists know must inspire and inform this initiative. Despite the setbacks and the frustrations of the past development decades, anthropology has accumulated a valuable store of experience about what works and what does not. For anthropologists, the challenge for the present is to find ways to use their experience wisely and effectively.

There can be no more fitting arena for the application of what anthropology knows, no better dynamic for revitalizing and transforming a discipline into a profession, and no higher mission than the creation of a just, equitable, and prosperous future for all of humanity. If we neglect this task, then we—and the rest of the world—will continue to have development defined and done for us by organizations which know much less than they should.

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NOTES

[1]This assertion may strike some as controversial and in need of proof, justification or at the very least, amplification. I don't have space to do this here. But see, for example, the following: Cernea (1987, 1991, 1996), Horowitz (1998a & b), Kottak (1991).

[2] Louis Lapham, writing about what he perceived as a similar characteristic of President George Bush père, observed: "This lack of development is fairly common among people born to the assumptions of wealth and rank. They can afford to believe what they choose to believe, and they seldom find it necessary to revise the texts of the preferred reality." (Harpers, March 1992: 7). The end of the Cold War may have made it even more difficult

for our aid agencies to learn. Speaking of the attitude of "triumphalism" in the West following the breakup of the Soviet Union, where, in the view of many, capitalism and the market "triumphed" over socialism and centralized planning, Samoff (1996: 616) notes: "This triumphalism has (at least) two powerful consequences for the relationship between aid and policy making. Those who have triumphed need no longer listen. Since they know what is right, and since it is their power, rather than negotiation, that secures their interests, they can instruct rather than learn. Moreover, since the triumph, they believe, proves the correctness of their perspective, they need to feel reticent or guilty about telling others what to do."

[3] The term "technicist" isn't widely used, but the mind-set – and the problems it creates – are discussed in a number of places. See, for example, Cernea (1996), Chambers (1993, 1997).

[4] See Roe (1991, 1995), and Hoben (1995).

[5] The phrase "rural development tourism" is, of course, from Robert Chambers (1988).

[6] The "dirty hands/guilty knowledge" phrase is from Fetterman (1983). This raises ethical issues far beyond the scope of this paper. Many academic anthropologists, far from wanting to confront these issues, would prefer it if anthropologists stayed away from them altogether, a position which I consider morally bankrupt.

[7] Smillie 1998.

[8] Bierce 1958.

[9] The Bank "defines" development: Finnemore (1997) discusses how this has operated to define poverty within the World Bank. As Finnemore points out, the organization of the Bank and the kinds of people the Bank employs constitute an elaborate filtering and transforming mechanism, taking in ideas at one end and turning these into policies, programs and projects at the other end. Only certain ideas are taken in, of course, and only certain solutions are produced. Originally, development was conceived of as simply an attempt to raise GNP, and this was to be done through industrialization. This, in turn, was promoted through capital-intensive infrastructure projects. Between 1968 and the mid-70s, however, the alleviation of poverty was "discovered" by the Bank, and subsequently institutionalized. The Bank functions, therefore, as a major arbiter of development norms and meanings. One result of this that until a problem, issue, opportunity or concept has been "noticed" by the Bank, it does not really exist. And once it has been noticed, it tends to become, as it were, the Bank's intellectual property.

[10] See, for example, Nolan (1998, 2001).

[11] See, for example, Erve Chambers (1991).

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