

Reimagining Development: How do Multi-Method Approaches Shape Development Practice?

Towards its goal of tackling significant local and global challenges, the Institute for Global Development (IGD) at the University of New South Wales is forging a research and practice stream that seeks to 'reimagine' development. This stream forms part of the Institute's Partnerships, Practice and Global Goals Initiative, which is building partnerships that balance the rights of communities to determine their development pathways while contributing to collective goals. The project seeks to identify (a) relevant critical shifts/disruptions in the context of development practice, (b) critical conversations that need to be had on these shifts/disruptions and with whom, and (c) critical questions that interrogate current discourse and practice.

Overview & Purpose of the Roundtable

On 16 September 2021, IGD hosted a roundtable on "Reimagining Development: How do Multi-Method Approaches Shape Development Practice?". The roundtable was convened and led by Dr. George Varughese, Research to Practice Associate at the IGD and Senior Strategic Advisor at Niti Foundation. Building on the discussion that emerged in a previous roundtable hosted by the IGD in 2020 (practice papers presented there can be downloaded [here](#) and an overview of the event is available [here](#)), this roundtable set out to explore how approaches that deliberately deploy multiple methods can better shape development practice. The invited participants comprised an intentionally diverse group of participants who could suggest ways to improve how we appraise, talk about, and practice development. Specifically, participants discussed how methods in anthropology and urban planning can enhance and authenticate the understanding and appraisal of development contexts. The discussions emerging from the event will contribute to how the vocabulary, instruments, and processes of engagement in development practice can be shaped in accordance with multi-method approaches to contextual appraisal.

Discussion Summary

Dr. Varughese opened proceedings by highlighting that appraisal of context must be put at the centre of development praxis; local evidence must be respected and the treatment of community participation in development efforts must be reconsidered. He noted a few streams that are important for reimagining development: bringing theoretical coherence to the choice of disciplines for learning about and doing development, especially for contextual appraisal; developing curricula and pedagogy to teach both students and in-service development professionals; and focusing on publishing works that eschew 'donor-speak' and which foster community-based solution-focused discourse.

Following Dr. Varughese's contextualization of the discourse, participants interacted around three short papers with the help of authors and commentators. The intention was to have an open-ended conversation that echoed, challenged and supplemented the reimagining of ideas explored in the papers. An overview of the discussion prompted by the three papers is provided below.

Development Practice as an Open-Ended Cultural Exchange that Builds Upon the Strength of Local Social Institutions by Dr. Prista Ratanapruck (Institute for Integrated Development Studies), with Dr. David Martin (Anthropos Consulting) as commentator

Abstract

This paper takes the idea of development as conceived of by the Manangi community from Nepal and its diaspora, to help us reimagine what development could look like. The case of the Manangis indicates that the notion of development is not universal but is shaped by values specific to each society; and that development has the highest chance of being realized if it is built upon the strength of local social institutions. (A short presentation about their community is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5xD_tb1zt0.) The Manangis have a clear sense of their shared aspirations as well as the institutional capacity to achieve them. Not all communities have this social capital. I would like to invite participants to discuss: 1) How might we develop a language, a set of vocabulary, or a methodology for recognizing the institutional strength of a community, identifying its absence, and supporting its growth or helping it mature? 2) Given the current development paradigm and practice, what changes are necessary, if we were to approach development as an open-ended cultural exchange where development practitioners and local communities draw from each other's unfamiliar values, priorities, and social practices to reimagine and co-construct their goals, and co-design context-specific paths to achieving them?

Discussion

Dr. Ratanapruck's paper focused on how the creation of social institutions which align individual motives with larger social goals and reinforce cultural norms that promote socially desirable behaviour can lead to social and economic prosperity by promoting cooperation rather than competition, and redistribution of wealth instead of accumulation. It also emphasized the importance of dialogue between development



practitioners and local communities to reflect on cultural assumptions, and questions values taken for granted.

In discussing the paper, Dr. Martin raised three questions: first, the role of women in the development of the Mangangi community which seemed curiously silent; second, the internal ethics of the Manangi community regarding gem trade and gem extraction and those interactions with wider society; and third, the relationship between Manangi development and the wider communities encompassing it, as development does not occur in isolation. He also compared the similar situations and different outcomes of the Manangi community and remote Aboriginal communities in Australia.

The discussion led to the recognition of the importance of the cultural values and priorities of communities for development practice. The discussion also highlighted the importance of different ethical considerations shaping externally transformative development in disrupted contexts like the colonized Aboriginal communities in Australia compared to the community-led development of the Manangis in Nepal.

Ethnography and Development by Assistant Professor Kabir Mansingh Heimsath (Lewis and Clark College), with Emerita Professor Helen Lee (La Trobe University) as commentator

Abstract

This paper considers the relevance of ethnography to development practice. As a research practice within anthropology, ethnography is simultaneously empirical and comparative, descriptive and theoretical. In the development context, however, ethnography has generally been utilized as narrowly descriptive – the practice of documentation that helps us better understand a particular cultural context. I introduce a more contemporary approach to ethnography that strives towards theoretical understanding learned from others to critique, and potentially change, our own cultural assumptions. The essay summarizes a number of recent monographs used in teaching undergraduate anthropology courses to illustrate current trends in the discipline. I then consider their implications in a professional development context. What I offer is entirely speculative in that it strives towards what might become rather than what already is. These imaginings arise from a hybrid personal background running international education programs, evaluating development projects, conducting ethnographic research, teaching undergraduate anthropology and walking in the hills.

Discussion

Dr. Heimsath's paper focused on how the study of different cultures occurs through a comparative lens based on the researcher's background and context, and how this causes a critical reflection of assumptions regarding different contexts, livelihoods, and standard development models. The paper also raised the topic of a re-imagination of development through conversations with people from different, specific contexts and local residents.

The discussion centred on the necessity for contextual understanding and a multidisciplinary approach to development practice. Dr. Lee spoke about the need for sensitivity towards the political and cultural context within development practice and reporting. She also spoke about the necessity for vigilance against neo-



colonial forms of extraction and exploitation and the role of representation of local actors as safeguards against it. Further discussion noted the importance of bringing anthropological and cross-disciplinary thinking to engineering ventures like infrastructure building and urban planning, for both university curriculum, and practiced development and research work.

The discussion acknowledged the donor-driven, time-constrained, solution-focused nature of development practice, and suggested that development should be reimagined to include multidisciplinary teams, deep listening in local contexts, and research into the underlying systemic factors of the communities to overcome those limitations. It also highlighted the importance of understanding the institutional arrangements within development agencies and universities, and their relation to the contexts and ways in which human beings build coalitions and relate to each other.

Reconceptualizing the Intersection of Urban Planning and Development Assistance by Asha Ghosh (Yale University), with Lucinda Peterson (RMIT University and Northern Grampians Shire Council) as commentator

Abstract

The future is urban. Over 50% of the world's population lives in cities today and this is increasing. Planning for urban growth will be crucial for sustainable development and to address the most pressing urban problems – including climate change, inequality, and health. Urban planners have the potential to play a key role in facilitating innovative and necessary solutions. However, due to the nature of their day-to-day responsibilities and the political impetus for short-term planning, planners are constrained in what they can achieve. Reconceptualizing the field of urban planning offers the potential to establish a more pivotal role for planners. Professionals in the field of development assistance share a lot in common with urban planning professionals. In both fields, practitioners aspire to find solutions to complex problems by drawing on expertise from several fields to devise an integrated approach to addressing social and (built and natural) environmental or resource problems. However, in practice, development professionals often fail to effectively integrate local planning into projects and planners are constrained by national decentralization policies and local politics. In academic settings, these two fields rarely intersect, while in practice, there is a significant and growing opportunity to increase engagement across the two fields. Therefore, it is an opportune moment to consider the intersection of urban planning and development assistance for both pedagogy and practice.

Discussion

Ms. Ghosh's paper focused on the role of urban planning in facilitating development that aligns with local and community interests by engaging with the local context. The paper highlighted the limitations of infrastructure development in the context of rapid urbanization, which is usually siloed by international donors with a preference for quantification, with little overlap with local urban concerns.

The discussion focused on the political nature of urban planning. Plans often get co-opted to fulfil politicians' agendas and pass through a lot of red tape due to changes in the direction of the flow of funds from local governments to state or national governments. The discussion also highlighted cases like Nepal



where decentralization puts the responsibility of planning on local governments who might not have the requisite ability.

Notable points raised in discussion included the need for the development of training curricula for practising planners to turn the focus beyond isolated problem-solving and towards urban development plans grounded in community aspirations; the problem of not putting the relationship between individuals, communities, and their environment in the foreground; the trend of pushing Western approaches towards planning over traditional decision-making frameworks in developing countries; the salience of the links between planning, politics, governance, and infrastructure and the built environment; and the necessity of transparent discussion, with and by donors, about the political influences behind planning-related decision-making in the development and delivery of aided projects.

Looking Forward

Beyond the papers, the discussion also focused on the necessity to unlearn development practices and relearn them with a priority placed on listening throughout the appraisal, planning, and implementation of development initiatives. In short, this required donors to double down on, and reimagine what context-sensitive approaches look like in development aid.

The roundtable was only able to begin to explore these issues and begin to establish the foundations for further dialogue, which the IGD intends to support as the Reimagining Development Project continues.

