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Repopulating Development: An Agent-Based Approach to Studying Development Interventions

ERIN BECK*

University of Oregon, Eugene, USA

Summary. — When analyzing development projects, applied and critical scholars alike often place inordinate emphasis on the outcomes, depicting development projects as *happening to* people and overlooking the interactional nature of projects. This article offers an agent-based approach as a corrective, drawing on actor-oriented sociology, actor-network theory and alternative theories of power. An agent-based approach views development projects as socially constructed processes constituted by the interactions of policymakers, workers, “beneficiaries,” and their socio-material environments. Such an approach is able to provide a nuanced analysis of power in development projects and generate generalizations about the landscape of development NGOs, which is characterized by two types of tensions: the first deriving from the interactions of various lifeworlds at development interfaces; the second deriving from the conflicting organizational and development goals. The utility of an agent-based approach is then illustrated through a comparative, ethnographic analysis of two microcredit non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Guatemala. While both offer small loans and classes to women, the two NGOs operate according to divergent organizational values, structures, and developmental models. This comparative analysis reveals the interactional origins of organizational characteristics and developmental models across contrasting NGOs and shows that these in turn affect, but do not fully determine what happens on the ground. Even though policymakers exercise disproportionate power, the tensions inherent in both development NGOs ensure significant room for maneuver and negotiation on the part of workers and “beneficiaries.” Thus, the two NGOs’ trajectories and outcomes are products of top-down values, structures and models *and* the creative, emergent interactions between actors involved at various levels of development.

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Key words — international development, non-governmental organizations, agency, ethnography, Guatemala, microcredit

1. INTRODUCTION

Development scholars and practitioners have often focused on outcomes —judging projects in terms of their pre-established objectives. Others have been more interested in development institutions’ role in reinforcing global power disparities, and grassroots attempts at resistance. Despite their differences, however, at times both groups have depicted development projects as *happening to* people, and thus overlooked the interactional nature of projects. By focusing on the outcomes of projects in terms of their stated or “hidden” agendas, scholars have downplayed questions that are analytically prior: how are development projects constituted in the first place? What determines what actually happens on the ground? Answering these questions requires a different approach that explores how interventions are embedded in, and transformed by, particular environments, actors, and their interactions.

This article offers such an approach by drawing on actor-oriented sociology, actor-network theory, and alternative theories of power. It first outlines how an inordinate emphasis on outcomes leads to incomplete depictions of people and projects. Then, it demonstrates how agent-based models act as a corrective, and outlines the key tenets of an agent-based approach to the study of development that analyzes projects as socially constructed processes constituted by the interactions of policymakers, workers, “beneficiaries,”¹ and their socio-material environments, using the field of development NGOs to illustrate.² This approach provides a more nuanced analysis of power in development and generates generalizations about the landscape of development NGOs, which is characterized by two types of tensions: the first deriving from the interactions of lifeworlds at development interfaces; the second deriving from the conflicting organizational and development goals. The article then demonstrates the utility of an

agent-based approach, and provides evidence of these tensions by drawing on comparative ethnographies of two microcredit NGOs in Guatemala that embody competing approaches to development.

2. THE WEAKNESSES OF OUTCOME-FOCUSED RESEARCH

Interested in improving the lives of the poor, applied researchers and critical scholars alike historically focused on outcomes. In their evaluations, practitioners and applied researchers compared “before” and “after” measures, attributing differences to the intervention at hand (in the field of microfinance see: Amin & Becker, 1998; Angelucci, Karlan, & Jonathan, 2014; Brau, Hiatt, & Woodworth, 2009; Fiala, 2013; Pitt, Cartwright, & Khandker, 2007; Tarozzi, Desai, & Johnson, 2013; Weber & Ahmad, 2014; Wydick, 1999a, 1999b). These studies rested to varying degrees on punctualization (Latour, 1999): the fact that any given intervention was constituted by numerous networks, interactions, and non-linear processes (many originating outside of the project at

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hand) was concealed so that the intervention could be handled as a single object of study. Practitioners and applied researchers held instrumental views in which policies were developed purely on the basis of the problem at hand and thereafter guided implementation and interactions on the ground (Mosse, 2003, 2005). In this view, gaps between policy and implementation were dysfunctions to be addressed with better policy, technologies or oversight.

Numerous scholars—some evaluating development projects from the outside (De Herdt & Bastiaensen, 2007; Mitchell, 2002), others drawing on “insiders’ views” (Korf, 2006; Mosse, 2003, 2005)—have since noted a persistent instrumental view of policy and techno-rational bias even in the face of shifting discourses about indigenous knowledge and participatory development. This tendency has become all the more apparent today in the face of the increasing popularity of randomized controlled trials (RCTs), which prioritize quantitative measures, stated objectives, and “before” and “after” comparisons (Davidson, 2006; Faulkner, 2014).

In competing tradition, critical scholars (often grouped under the label of “post-development”) highlighted development’s “hidden” agenda of expanding Western hegemony. Early critical scholars characterized development efforts as self-serving, part of a much longer history of colonization (Hancock, 1989; Hayter, 1971). Some argued that the primary, hidden aim of development agencies was to reproduce the aid apparatus or widen market relations (Gould, 2005; Rist, 1997). Others “deconstructed” development discourses, arguing that far from necessary, empowering, natural or neutral, development discourses and practices reproduced inequality and facilitated cognitive and social control (Apffel-Marglin & Marglin, 1990; Brigg, 2001; Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1992, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Ganesh, 2005; Lairap-Fonderson, 2002; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; Sachs, 1992; Shore & Wright, 1997). Scholars in this tradition connected development, structural adjustment, and the growing global divide, accusing practitioners of hiding behind techno-rational instruments such as logframes in the process of rendering development technical (Kroeker, 2012; Li, 2007). In this view, even development interventions that failed to meet their stated goals succeeded in their political purpose. Post-structural scholars tended to be “domino-centric” (Diawara, 2000), focusing on how powerful networks shaped the world to perpetuate their power and depicting grassroots movements and organizations as potential sites of resistance (Apffel-Marglin & PRATEC, 1998; see Lewis & Mosse, 2006a, 2006b for further discussion of this tendency). Thus while applied researchers often operated on the spectrum of failure and success, critical scholars operated on the spectrum of domination and resistance, even if they did not use this language explicitly.

While NGOs have a much longer history (see Lewis, 2009; Lissner, 1977), the international humanitarian and development community became especially interested in NGOs in the face of NGO efforts in the aftermath of violent conflicts in places like Biafra (1968–69), Bangladesh (1971–72) and Cambodia (1979 and after). The 1980s saw a dramatic increase in the number and involvement of NGOs in development, as well as a growing scholarly interest in “third sector” organizations.³ Scholars wrote of the “associational revolution,” and one compared the rise of NGOs in the late twentieth century to that of the nation-state in the previous century (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Fisher, 1998). Those in the applied tradition were initially optimistic that NGOs could better implement development projects, serve intermediary roles between the grassroots, governments and development institutions, and challenge mainstream thinking and practice (Ahuja, 1994;

Bebbington, Farrington, Lewis, & Wellard, 1993; Carroll, 1992; Clark, 1991; Drabek, 1987; Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Fowler, 1993; Korten, 1987, 1990; Paul & Israel, 1991). Yet, by the mid-1990s, many began to question NGOs’ comparative advantages. Dialogs between scholars and practitioners raised questions about NGOs’ effectiveness, accountability, relationships with donors and states, and ability to “scale up” without compromising their grassroots connections (Atack, 1999; Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2014; Bano, 2008; Bebbington, 2005; Bebbington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Farrington, Bebbington, Lewis, & Wellard, 1993; Markowitz & Tice, 2002; MirafTAB, 1997; Power, Maury, & Maury, 2002; Vivian, 1994).⁴

Early critical literature on development at times overlooked NGOs, or saw them as sources of resistance—evidenced by NGOs’ push for the New International Economic Order (Hancock, 1989; Sen & Grown, 1987). But the fusion of neoliberal prescriptions and support for NGOs in the late 1980s and 1990s led critical scholars to connect “NGOization” to neoliberalism (Arellano-López & Petras, 1994; Feldman, 1997, 2003; Gideon, 1998; Goldman, 2005; Kamat, 2004; Karim, 2011; Mitchell, 2002). They explored the ways that NGOs helped transform problems of structural inequality into issues of individual responsibility, to be addressed with technical solutions (Crush, 1995; Elyachar, 2005; Eriksson Baaz, 2005; Feldman, 2003), and claimed this process undermined grassroots organizing, muting oppositional voices as service delivery took precedence over advocacy (Alvarez, 1999; Arellano-López & Petras, 1994; Feldman, 1997; Gideon, 1998; Kamat, 2004; Kapoor, 2005; Lang, 2013; Petras, 1999; Silliman, 1999). Many came to see NGOs as bureaucratized organizations, contaminated by donor-driven agendas and foreign “expertise” (see Hodžić, 2014 for a description of the “NGOization” literature), and sites of governmentality (Foucault, 1980), in which “developers” shaped the poor’s behavior and desires in ways that maintained the status quo (Brigg, 2001; Karim, 2011; Lairap-Fonderson, 2002; Sharma, 2014). As a result, these scholars tended to overlook the diversity of NGOs⁵ and their struggles to maintain their core values, ensure downward accountability, and resist international pressures (Andrews, 2014; Beck, 2014; Kilby, 2006, 2011; Smillie, 1995).

Despite their many differences, however, applied and critical researchers at times fell into similar traps when studying development interventions: relying on incomplete depictions of “developers” (policymakers and workers), “beneficiaries,” and development organizations. Applied researchers and practitioners often focused on models, policies, and outcomes in order to identify characteristics of more successful strategies. At times, they failed to question policies that depicted “beneficiaries” as recipients alone and relied on homogenizing depictions of the “consensual village,” “altruistic women,” and the “powerless poor” (Olivier de Sardan, 2005). While it was common to ask how interventions changed “beneficiaries” lives, it was rarely asked how “beneficiaries” changed interventions (for exceptions see Andrews, 2014; Kilby, 2006).

The push toward participatory development shifted attention to “beneficiaries” for a time, based on the premise that the poor had the relevant development expertise. However, even when the principles of participatory development were sincerely pursued, the focus on “beneficiaries” as diverse people with agency was rarely complemented by similar treatments of policymakers and development workers. Since that time, there has been a noted shift from the participatory approach of the 1990s “to a more control-oriented upward accountability” that emphasizes results-based management

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