

# Doing development as a critical development scholar

Farhana Sultana\*

*Department of Geography, Syracuse University, USA*

Development is challenging in theory, policy and practice. Navigating and negotiating institutions and politics can make ‘doing development’ confusing, contradictory, convoluted, complex or gut-wrenching. Nonetheless, it is important that we do this, albeit carefully, conscientiously and ethically. Thinking about, writing about, acting upon or implementing development in any other way has already been criticised and questioned, especially through examination of how rendering development technical has reproduced problematic policies and practices.<sup>1</sup> Many academics are in unique positions to take the risks necessary to challenge and change this through active engagement. When possible, scholars should engage and ‘do development’, while being mindful of how academic practice is of use to and commensurable with development policy and implementation. In this brief essay I share insights from my own work experience as a Programme Officer at the United Nations Development Programme, as well as being an academic who teaches about and researches development, and as someone from the developing world.

While not many academics leave the ivory tower and then come back, I believe I am more informed, enriched and thoughtful in my teaching, research and outlook as a result of having done so. Working with a variety of development organisations and actors involved in a multi-million dollar programme taught me a number of things that I have brought to the academy; conversely, my academic training enabled me to contribute to ‘doing development’ in ways that perhaps even I had not envisioned. It was a first-hand opportunity to question what is actually happening (or not) in the name of development, to provide input, to contribute in a variety of ways, and to learn from the process.

‘Doing development’ as a development practitioner is different from consulting for an organisation. As Carr has argued,<sup>2</sup> experience of working within a development institution provides insights into the bureaucracies and everyday operations of a complex system, and enables one to closely understand how development happens – from conceptualisation of a project, through project formulation, budgeting, approvals, contracts, monitoring and evaluations (ie the budget cycle), to the messiness of politics, power plays and the human-ness of every aspect of getting anything done on a daily basis. Such insights garnered through experience are valuable in understanding the nuances of development.

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\*Email: [sultanaf@syr.edu](mailto:sultanaf@syr.edu)

However, the insularity, repetition, opacity and often disconnected rationales of development institutions can be daunting.<sup>3</sup> Abstract notions of development and its theories may get smothered by the minutiae of practicalities and practices. Learning how the system works takes time and patience. Wavering between cynicism and idealism, boredom and horror, are not uncommon. Within large organisations, business-as-usual is easier and prevalent, whereby efforts perceived to ‘rock the boat’ can bring on doubt, resistance and rejection. A productive and critical engagement with development may feel like doing ‘double shift’ – doing the mundane, rote and challenging aspects of the job as well as constantly being critically reflexive and critiquing what is being done. The end results are important, nonetheless, and demonstrate how academics can have meaningful input in development. While complicated analyses are more difficult, they are critical to improving policy outcomes and configuring what is missing or problematic.

Academic knowledge and training can be used to challenge or transform what is being done (or not) in the name of development, especially in spaces that don’t always have the opportunity to critique in such ways. Engaged academics can facilitate such transformation by translating ideas and theories to make them more accessible and relevant. Connecting, rethinking and reassessing ideas, policies and practices, often the bedrocks of our critical and analytical approaches, can then have an impact. Mindful of this, I was able to make strategic decisions on input and interventions in small and meaningful ways that could have a large impact over time. For instance, I placed great attention on ensuring gender sensitivity across all projects, by not only questioning the problematic and hegemonic usage of the term ‘gender’, but by offering paths forward by creating spaces for multiple perspectives and closer engagement with feminist and postcolonial scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Feminist insights were integrated in careful ways: not the age-old ‘add women and stir’, but by ensuring an intersectional understanding of gender (by class, race, age, etc) in any social analyses of project implementation. The result was a shift in the assumptions of project staff, who came to appreciate that differently located women had diverse voices and abilities, and those differences had to be sought out and understood to ensure project success and mutual learning. Such transformations can make ‘doing development’ more robust and meaningful. While questioning the appropriations and implementations of other popular development terminology (such as community, participation, empowerment) also raised some eyebrows, caused discomfort or produced eye-rolling, it was imperative to do so continually, conscientiously and collaboratively.<sup>5</sup>

However, the thoughtful, resourceful questioning of development dogmas can be complicated by the identity and positionality of the engaged scholar-practitioner, and this can influence the weight given to ideas or contributions.<sup>6</sup> In efforts to influence the outcomes of meetings, decisions and project processes, I was constantly reminded of and reflected upon my own embodied subjectivity in configuring what I could do or say, and whether it had traction or uptake. While recognising that power relations do not erase differences in power or the work of power, it assists in configuring ways to have more democratic relationships and enabling a range of voices to be heard. This is a critical tool, as issues of unequal power relations, temporality of relationships and projects, traction acceptability and usefulness of output, fairness and reciprocity of the process,

and appreciation, acknowledgement or recognition within the wider institution continue to be of concern.<sup>7</sup> In my experience I had to employ this keen awareness in figuring out the audiences and the conversations that needed to be had, while being reflexive and mindful of the mechanics and logistics of it, and being exceptionally vigilant about speaking ‘for’ people and Othering.<sup>8</sup> The reality of critical development engagement is thus not easy: rather it is incredibly difficult.

While ‘doing development’ is challenging, it is important to be willing to engage, to have difficult conversations about problematic assumptions and data, and to work with different groups of people to understand institutional processes and complexities. Some academics have the privilege and opportunity to take these risks, which others may not, in order to engage a wider audience that goes beyond the academic/policy binary. There is no easy or perfect way to approach this, but I believe that it is a responsibility of critical development scholars to use their positions of privilege and power to do more in engaging with various groups and organisations to influence development debates, discourses, practices, institutions and policies.

### Notes on Contributor

Farhana Sultana is Associate Professor of Geography at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs of Syracuse University. Previously, she taught at King’s College London and worked at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Farhana has a BA (*Cum Laude*) in Geosciences and Environmental Studies from Princeton University and MA and PhD in Geography from University of Minnesota, where she was a MacArthur Fellow. She has broad and interdisciplinary research interests in critical development studies, water governance, feminist studies, political ecology and qualitative research methods. Farhana has published widely on these topics for academic and non-academic audiences, and her latest book is *The Right to Water: Politics, Governance and Social Struggles* (Routledge, New York and London, 2012).

### Notes

1. Escobar, *Encountering Development*; Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine*; and Li, *The Will to Improve*.
2. Simon et al., “Geographers and/in Development,” 2797.
3. Mosse, *Adventures in Aidland*.
4. See, for example, Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*; Marchand and Parpart, *Feminism, Postmodernism, Development*; and Visvanathan et al., *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*.
5. Cf. Cook and Kothari, *Participation*; and Sultana, “Community and Participation in Water Resources Management.”
6. Sultana, “Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics.”
7. See, for example, Mosse, *Cultivating Development*; Mosse, *Adventures in Aidland*; and Lewis and Mosse, *Development Brokers and Translators*.
8. Cf. Spivak, “Responsibility”; Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; and Kothari, “Critiquing ‘Race’ and Racism.”

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