

Worldview, epistemology, and community-sensitive development

Deborah Cummins¹

Back in 2011, together with a team of talented researchers in the department of Community Development at the National University of Timor-Leste, I worked on a research project investigating peoples' perspectives of how development was implemented in their local community. Our group of community development lecturers and senior students conducted fieldwork in five different *aldeia*² across the country, looking into how they defined good development, how development projects and programs contributed to their social wellbeing, whether development processes were sensitive to conflict and encouraged women's participation, and the impact of external influences from the Government, NGOs, United Nations and others.

It was a wonderful project, with a really good team of researchers. We all had high hopes that the results would help us to advocate for better development practices in communities. But when we came together to compare the first round of fieldwork data, there was a major obstacle. Overwhelmingly, across all of the different fieldwork sites, community members stated that they considered development to be 'something that the government does'—in particular, the building of infrastructure. Even though researchers tried to get people to talk about issues of human development, or the nuances of local economic development, as soon as the word 'development' was mentioned discussions immediately reverted to the government's building of roads, or of bridges, or of the country's electrical system.

At first, we were pretty disappointed that we couldn't use the data to step up our own advocacy on the broader development process. But then we realised that it actually did tell us something extremely important: that people didn't realise that as citizens, development and good development processes were issues that they got a vote in. People didn't realise that development could be much, much more than the building of bridges. They weren't aware that alternative approaches even existed.

What surprised me most was the contrast between these research results, and the results of research that a number of people (including myself) had done in the past on local governance principles and practices (see for example Boavida dos Santos & da Silva 2012; Grenfell 2008; Cummins 2014). When speaking of local governance, I already knew that Timorese villagers were highly analytical about how they wished to govern themselves and their desire to live both according to their culture and democratic principles, and were very reflective over how their culture contributes to their social wellbeing. I knew that community members were very capable of bringing nuanced, critical reflections to discussions of local development processes. It was simply that the word 'development' got in the way.

What was surprising back then is no longer surprising now. When we consider the history of development in Timor-Leste over the past fifteen years, and even before then during Indonesian occupation, development has almost invariably been presented as synonymous with economic development, which has then been interpreted as building new infrastructure. We see this reflected in the support that is given by international organisations, programs and statements that are made by the Timor-Leste government and even advocacy campaigns that are conducted by Timorese civil society.

Now, at this point I want to be crystal clear. I'm not suggesting that these discussions are 'wrong': indeed, who am I to suggest that infrastructure is not important? But they are incomplete. By limiting development to economic issues, and by looking for infrastructural solutions, we conflate development projects or outcomes (new roads, or buildings) with the hoped-for impact (the improving of people's lives.) In so doing, we miss opportunities to manage the economy in ways that suit the context. We close the door on important discussions over how current development processes contribute to, or take away from, people's lives.

On the surface, this confusion around the word 'development' may seem semantic. It's just a word, right? However, it actually masks (or, potentially, unmask) deeper epistemological and

¹ Founder and Director of Bridging Peoples: www.bridgingpeoples.com

² *Aldeia*: subvillage, part of a *suku* or village.

normative tensions at the heart of development theory and practice. To understand this point, it's worth looking briefly at the history of international development across the world.

As an area of academic and theoretical enquiry, the development industry is relatively young. It emerged mid-last century following the end of World War II, as the various colonies across Africa, Asia and other parts of the world fought for and won their independence. Before then, there were disciplines of economics, of law and politics, of anthropology and cultural theory, of agriculture and health—and, of course, the theories underpinning different styles of colonisation. There was no discipline of development.

As the previous colonies gained their independence, but with boundaries not of their own making, embracing a mixture of ethnic and religious groups that often bore only a vague resemblance to traditional notions of communal and tribal identity, and grappling with a difficult and often violent history, they faced many challenges. In those early days immediately following World War II, hopes were high in the newly independent states regarding what independence would bring to the previously colonised people. However, these high expectations were slowly replaced by disillusionment as it became clear that independence did not necessarily translate into a brighter future. International political and economic systems were already tipped sharply in favour of those already developed nations—the previous colonisers.

Just as importantly, within the newly-independent nations it became clear that the spoils of independence and sovereignty over the nation's wealth were not going to be available to all its citizens. Freedom and independence for most people did not mean access to more food, better health care, more jobs or better education. On the contrary, in many of these countries there were many more conflicts, inequities and poverty (see for example Bates *et al.* 2007; Mamdani 1996).

It was in this context that the development industry came to be, as the newly independent governments tried to exercise their sovereign power, Western powers adapted their international politics to deal with this changing reality, aid money became part of transactional politics, used to secure political, legal or economic changes in the previous colonies, and theories were developed to explain how best to either 'help' or 'control' them.

Principal among these theories at the time was the theory of 'modernisation' (see for example Lipsett 1959; Apter 1965), which was based on the erroneous assumption that if the previous colonies would only develop liberal political systems (similar to that of their previous colonisers), and economic growth was promoted in line with Western economic thinking, then they could move along an evolutionary path from 'developing' to being fully 'developed'. They would become politically and economically stable, and open to engagement with Western powers (a particular concern in the context of Cold War politics.) All of this, of course, ignoring the basic fact that the prosperity of Western nations was based largely on riches they gained through exploiting their colonies. As people inevitably discovered that modernisation theory did not work in practice, it was discarded and another theory took its place: 'dependency theory', which traced many of the problems back to modernisation itself (see for example Frank 1967).

Since that time we have seen this cycle repeated multiple times, as various challenges have been made to how the development industry operates, only to see it return to its basic philosophical starting point: that there is a evolutionary path through which developing countries can (and should) become developed. In the 1970s, for example, USAID agencies promoted a 'law and development' movement, based on similar reasoning—that if Western-style political and legal systems were introduced, then better, more inclusive development would follow (see for example Merryman 1977). This too was discarded, as it became clear that simply importing Western legal institutions into developing countries was doomed to fail (Trubek and Galanter 1974). Most recently, the same cycle has been taken up by 'good governance' theorists, who argue that if developing countries develop political and economic systems based on 'good' governance principles (which donor agencies get to define), then this will set the stage for better, more inclusive development (de Alcantara 1998). Similarly, to previous iterations of this policy cycle, this too has received heavy criticism, and appears to be nearing its death-knell. Same ideas, new terminology.

The durability of this policy cycle demonstrates how deeply embedded the modernist normative assumption is in how the development industry works, despite its acknowledged failures. While there have been some changes made to the periphery of the development industry as new things

have been learned, the basic centre upon which the industry was founded and Western aid agencies have operated has never disappeared.

Two important implications can be drawn from this. First, as has been touched on already, the development industry's emphasis on promoting economic growth and liberal political institutions has meant that alternative approaches—for example, approaches to the economy that support subsistence economies rather than being wholly growth-focussed—have not been systematically explored, except in small break-away sections of the industry. Second, the development industry's focus on political and economic outcomes has meant that the social and cultural context tends to be missed, with the danger that everyday citizens whose lives are very different to those in Western societies are left behind. What both of these things have meant in practice is that we have lost important opportunities to learn about what actually works in different cultures, and get smart about basing our work on existing resources, strengths and knowledge in that context.

So where does this leave us? Returning to the Timorese experience, the past fifteen years which have also seen a focus on development as 'progress' in this very narrow sense, has failed to engage adequately with villagers' cultural and social realities. This appears to have contributed significantly to creating, and then entrenching, the 'gap' which is commonly remarked on between the Timor-Leste Government and its citizens (see for example the Asia Foundation 2012). While this gap is often simplistically referred to as a 'lack of state presence' in the villages of Timor-Leste, it is more complicated than this. In fact, it is quite common to go to even very remote *aldeia* and find signs about various Government and other externally-led programs. Rather than a lack of state presence, what we are really reflecting on is the lack of state *impact* in the villages. While this gap cuts across urban and rural settings, the consequences are particularly apparent in the rural areas, where the majority of Timorese live (see for example Inoue 2013). This gap causes very real frustration for communities and Government alike, as community members blame the Government for a failure to deliver and Government officials blame community members for their 'dependency mentality'. It plays out in how services are delivered, the extent to which villagers are engaged in various consultations and political movements, and the unwillingness of many community members to contribute to, and participate in, state programs for community benefit unless they are paid to do so. Many projects are improperly implemented because of lack of real engagement in the village context, and there is minimal impact because ordinary community members are not brought along for the ride (see for example The Asia Foundation 2012).

A brief survey of the various reports and 'best practice' principles that have been produced in response to this issue would have us believe that the problem is simply about programs 'not working locally'. However, if we agree that mainstream development's focus on political and economic 'progress', effectively ignoring cultural and social context, has in fact contributed to this divide, and if the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results, then we must either admit our collective madness, or search for an alternative. When we truly examine the issue, it becomes clear that it is not only about whether or not we engage locally (although local engagement is of course essential). It is also about the *processes* through which we engage—whether or not we are capable of respectfully engaging in the community's local cultural context, and whether or not the system that surrounds us can support us in doing so. This means we need to stop thinking about context as something that is added at the end, but instead consider it as the very basis of what we do.

Shifting perspectives in this way is what community-sensitive development is all about. It draws significantly on community development principles, but also looks for ways to strategically and systematically apply it in the international development arena, beyond individual communities. While it is commonly presumed that international and community development are much the same (except that community development operates at the local level) in both theory and practice this is not the case.

As has already been explored, theories of international development were formed to explain and guide the new, post-World War Two, post-colonial politics. By and large, they were based on theories of economic growth and political liberalism—approaches which continue to command a privileged intellectual space and access to research dollars in the development industry as it is today. By contrast, community development is much more closely aligned with social work theory (Rothman 2008). Unlike international development which believes it already knows what outcomes should be

achieved, community development principles are more process-oriented, looking for ways to engage with the broader context and help people work with each other in moving towards a shared common vision. Emphasis is put on first understanding community dynamics before attempting to engage, and then working with the unique strengths (including cultural strengths) that exist in that community. Because of its localised nature, it has often been dismissed as ‘too soft’, or ‘too difficult’ to incorporate into ‘real’ development practice. It takes significant time to do well, scaling up is an issue, and outcomes are determined collectively (meaning that while the overall goal exists, it cannot be completely pre-determined). Nonetheless, with effort these obstacles can be overcome, and community development theory and practice has proven its worth in multiple cases (see for example Barefoot Guide Writers Collective 2015).

Unfortunately to date, what has tended to happen when community development successes are recognised is that the ideas have been co-opted, uncritically placed in the international development context, and consequently lost their meaning because the issue of epistemology (or, to be less academic, worldview) has been ignored. Seductive phrases such as ‘participatory’, ‘community-driven’, and ‘community resilience’ have become stock-standard—to be included in funding proposals and logframe checklists—but without changing how the work is done. In short, they become jargonised. But what if we could insert not only community development words, but their principles and epistemology into mainstream development practice? What if we could use those principles, not only to work at the local level, but to consider how to mend the damaged links between decision-makers and community members, by re-valuing local knowledge, culture, and wisdom?

It could be done, if we commit to working in ways that go beyond jargon to critically engaging with the underlying principles. We still have many more questions than answers, but we should not shy away from engaging with issues of epistemology—which is simply a way of describing our worldview, how we claim to know our world. And a good starting point is by beginning to ask ourselves new questions. Questions like: ‘how do we claim to know that this is the right approach, or even the right goal?’ ‘Who and where are we sourcing our information and knowledge as we design, plan, implement and measure the success of our work?’ If our answer is ‘from a book’, ‘from an expert’, ‘from a donor’ or ‘from best practice in other countries’, we might be working locally but it is still likely part of the mainstream development cycle which has been tried and failed multiple times. If, however, part of our answer is ‘from local knowledge’ or ‘from community members’, this is potentially a path worth exploring.

References

- Apter, D 1965, *The politics of modernisation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Asia Foundation 2012, *Community perceptions of decentralised development*, Dili, Timor-Leste
- Barefoot Guide Writers Collective 2015, *The barefoot guide 4: exploring the real work of social change*, www.barefootguide.org.
- Bates, R et al 2007, ‘Lost decades: post-independence performance in Latin America and Africa’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 67(4): 917-943.
- Boavida dos Santos, A. and da Silva, E. 2012, ‘Introduction of a modern democratic system and its impact on societies in East Timorese traditional culture’, *Local-Global Journal* 12: 206-220
- Cummins, D. 2014, *Local governance in Timor-Leste: lessons in postcolonial statebuilding*, Routledge, London and New York
- De Alcantara, C.H. 1998, ‘Uses and abuses of the concept of governance’, *International Social Science Journal* 50: 105-114
- Frank, A.G. 1967, *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London
- Grenfell, D. 2008, ‘Governance, violence and crises in Timor-Leste: estado seidauk mai’, Mearns, D. & Farram, S. (eds) *Democratic governance in Timor-Leste: reconciling the local and the national*, Darwin, CDU Press.
- Inoue, H. 2013, ‘Transitional gap of governance: social change and urban vulnerability in post-1999 East Timor’, *Understanding Timor-Leste*, Timor-Leste Studies Association Conference Proceedings 2013, pp. 234-238
- Mamdani, M. 1996, *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

- Merryman J.H. 1977, 'Comparative law and social change: on the origins, style, decline and revival of the law and development movement', *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 25: 457-91.
- Rothman, J. 2008, 'Multi modes of community intervention', in J. Rothman, J. Erlich, & J. Tropman (eds) *Strategies of community intervention* (7th ed), Eddie Bower, Peosta, IA, pp. 141—170.
- Seymour Martin Lipset 1959, 'Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy', *American Political Science Review* 53: 69-105
- The Asia Foundation 2012, *Community experiences of decentralised development*, Dili, Timor-Leste
- Trubek, D.M. and Galanter, M. 1974, 'Scholars in self-estrangement: some reflections on the crisis in law and development studies in the United States', *Wisconsin Law Review* 4: 1018-1062.