The experience of development practice in an age of inequality

*Deborah Rhodes, Consultant; Rhonda Chapman, Consultant; and Meghan Cooper,
International Women's Development Agency*

Introduction

Development practitioners are typically motivated to tackle inequality and injustice in ethical ways. When development practitioners reach the 'frontline' of development assistance, they face highly complex contexts, characterised by a range of political, cultural and institutional dilemmas. In the rapidly changing world of development theory, policy and institutions, how do practitioners successfully navigate the ethical and structural challenges they are regularly confronted with in their work. This question was discussed by workshop participants as part of 5th ACFID University Network Conference at Monash University, June 2015, facilitated by the authors and Dr Mark Moran. This article summarises and offers insights from over 30 participants and four facilitators about their own practical frames of reference and strategies. We relate these issues to relevant literature, affirm the value of such reflections, and share them here for a wider audience.

Practitioners in the development sector spend most of their time 'doing' development. Some think about the big questions: **why and what approaches** are important, or **how to lead** to bring about transformative change, or indeed, any kind of change. In practice, development practitioners rarely have the opportunity to collectively explore and reflect on the complexity of issues they face at personal levels. The ACFID workshop provided this opportunity and drew on participants' lived experiences, some over many years. The facilitators organised peer discussions to consider ways to navigate these issues in the next stage of their life journeys and careers.

Key themes generated by participants related to: ethics and leadership, their role as brokers, navigating one's own and others' cultural values, and the concept of working 'politically'.

Workshop approach

The stated purpose of the workshop was to 'give participants a chance to collectively explore and reflect on the complexity of issues faced in the current development environment, drawing on lived experiences'. The facilitators designed the workshop in response to their own reflections as practitioners, which revealed similar themes across a diversity of experiences. The workshop asked participants to consider three questions:

Question 1: What is our role? Are we development brokers?

- What is the appropriate role for us in balancing the priorities of partners and communities, and those of our own organisations and donors, particularly when they appear to be disconnected or even in conflict?

Question 2: Why are we doing this?

- What are the dominant cultural values that underpin development practice?
- How do we reconcile our own values with different values of our organisations and donors and partners?
- Whose values really dominate and are we unknowingly trying to impose our values in other contexts?

Question 3: How do we cope?

- What works in terms of positive coping strategies and tactics?
- How have we successfully navigated and resolved the tensions often pulling us in different directions and challenges involved navigating between various agendas?
- What ethical and political issues have you faced in making representations and in communicating progress between different stakeholders? What has worked well?

Participants discussed one topic in groups of seven to eight people, considering the questions at individual, organisational and sectoral levels. They were encouraged to consider implications of questions for their own future in the sector. Group discussions were rich, engaging, sophisticated and at times, emotionally charged.

Discussion themes

A number of themes emerged from the discussions and are discussed below:

- Understanding one's own values, beliefs and strengths.
- Emotional resilience and self-care.
- Brokering, translating and interpreting between diverse worlds.
- Balancing adeptness in complex and dynamic contexts.
- Leadership skills.

Understanding one's own values, beliefs and strengths

One of the most dominant themes emerging from discussions was the importance accorded by practitioners to 'understanding ourselves.' This covered three areas: cultural values, personal politics and emotional strengths. Many participants noted these aspects of work are rarely considered in the rush to save lives, design and implement projects, and yet were identified as being fundamental to development effectiveness. Participants became more competent and effective in managing their roles as their understanding of their own values, politics and emotional strengths developed. Some reported disquiet about expectations of their role, for example, when operating within organisations with clashing cultural values or on projects where donor objectives clashed with local realities. For example, one said:

we always need to be aware of the connection or disconnection between our own values and those of the organisations we represent.

Knowing one's own cultural values is crucial for navigating the complexities of working internationally with, and within, different types of organisations. The many organisations involved in development have their own operating cultures that vary at national, sub-national and community levels. Participants identified the need to understand both their own cultural values as well as those of the countries where they work. They also acknowledged that important skills and qualities are needed to successfully navigate these differences but these are rarely taught (Rhodes 2014). Participants recognised that in order to navigate the multiple interests of donors, partners, and their employers, they needed to understand their own values. One said:

> the western values that underpin development approaches are largely not shared in the communities where we work, so to work across cultures effectively, we need to know both our own values and others 'values'.

Cultural value differences include the concept of 'personal identity politics',[1] which was mentioned by participants in the context of needing to understand how their own identity and politics influenced their interaction with development issues in different contexts, as well as how they were perceived by others. Cultural value differences are widely researched in business and change management disciplines but are relatively ignored in development practice (Hofstede 1980; House 2004). Workshop participants regarded cultural values and differences as critical for understanding different perceptions of change, development and inequality and how they might be addressed. Participants acknowledged that values of donor countries did not always match those in receiving countries. For example,

> it was liberating when I realised that people in developing countries may seek greater material wealth, like that in the west, but they didn't want to lose their family support networks, beliefs about the world and social structures.

Box 1: Examples of Australian and other cultural value differences

Differences in social cultural values (which underpin power, worldviews and behaviour etc.) between donor and recipient countries are significant. For example, according to Hofstede's research, Australian social values emphasise 'low power distance' and 'individualism' meaning, inter alia, that equality, participation and democracy are seen as positive phenomena; and individuals can choose their own paths. In contrast, many countries where aid is delivered are more likely to rate highly on 'high power distance' and 'collectivism' meaning communities expect senior and well-resourced leaders to make decisions on the group's behalf (i.e. not necessarily the 'public') and that decisions are likely to be made in the group's interests rather than for individual benefits.

Box 1 explains some typical cultural value differences relevant to development practice.

Participants also noted that the wisdom acquired at different life stages is important, but not always recognised or validated. They described the importance of having a connection between personal values and roles played, and that practitioners demonstrate integrity by effectively building shared values across diverse teams and partners. For example one said:

> our phase of life has an influence on how deeply we understand the complexity of development work and how successfully we can integrate field practice and theory.'

Demonstrating personal integrity coupled with a clear sense of personal identity politics also enables practitioners to know what is negotiable in their role and what is not, and scope for compromise. The capacity to negotiate according to one's personal values and integrity appears to strengthen over time as experience, wisdom and credibility are gained. Many participants stated that they begin to question their role, including considering leaving the sector, when they see their capacity to negotiate these issues is reduced or their balancing of integrity, values and role can no longer be maintained. Participants also noted that what is negotiable with regard to integrity and values changes over time, with people being less willing to compromise the longer they work in the sector. Participants' experience confirmed that ongoing self-reflection is critical.

Emotional resilience and self-care

Emotional resilience is widely identified in cultural adaptability research (Osland 2008). Workshop participants confirmed the importance of sustaining high levels of emotional capacity to survive tensions inherent in working in cross cultural and politically-charged contexts. Such capacity supported an individual's ability to cope with insecurity, conflict-related and physical challenges. It also involves navigating the tensions inherent with the 'imposition' of donor agendas in different cultural contexts. One group highlighted

> the importance of managing feelings of frustration, anger and stress that occur when having to design projects because donor money became available rather than because of local demand.'

Similar feelings were reported when practitioners were required to close down successful projects because a donor's policy had changed or budget cut made. Some participants commented that they had reached a stage in their career when they no longer had the emotional resilience to cope with the stresses and challenges of insisting on changes that were not likely to be achieved or reporting to donors on results that were not locally relevant. Others noted the importance of knowing when there was a need to leave their work or even the sector altogether, once the challenges became too great or they realised their level of resilience was insufficient for the situation. It is important for development practitioners to find a tolerable balance between idealism, pragmatism and values.

Linked to emotional resilience are the concepts of self-care, reflection and adaptability, which emerged as key themes for practitioners. Despite research on the wellbeing and welfare of aid workers (Porter and Emmens 2009; Solanki 2015), participants noted they were rarely provided opportunities to address these issues through networking, sharing personal experiences and lessons. Suggested effective strategies include: being kind to oneself; recognising the inevitability of projects closing and relationships being curtailed; developing stronger self-awareness and reflection skills; and deliberate attention to how to maintain personal integrity. This means being clear about how far one is willing to negotiate roles and tasks to ensure personal and professional integrity is maintained.

Brokering, translating and interpreting between diverse worlds

Participants grappled with the idea of 'development practitioner as a broker.' This aspect of their role in development was seen as the ability to work through complexity in values and power and to question objectively. The ability to broker effective partnerships was widely agreed as important by participants. The idea is not new and is affirmed in literature as critical for development effectiveness (Kelly and Roche 2014; Tennyson 2005). The practitioners reflected on their experiences acting in brokering versus technical roles and identified different contributions of each to development effectiveness. A broker was distinguished as one who is constantly navigating complex people and organisations, enabling them to work together towards common goals in diverse situations. A technical specialist was articulated as someone who provides tailored advice or responds to specific needs.

Brokering requires ongoing attention to enabling relationships between individuals from different backgrounds and working cultures. The role of a broker is as 'an active go-between or intermediary between different organisations and sectors (public, private and civil society) that aim to collaborate as partners in a sustainable development initiative' (Tennyson 2005:8). Participants noted they were brokering conversations and *ideas* as much as programs, services, training, or funding. Ultimately, a broker's role was seen as requiring constant attention to personal values, one's objectivity and recognising power that is exercised through this role.

One group referred to 'the constantly shifting sands' of brokering, which require individuals to continuously negotiate voice, power and representation. Workshop participants felt this needed both adaptive and reflective practice, enabling individuals to be aware of the power they exercise through negotiation. Participants said they found the constant negotiation process associated with brokering to be challenging and sometimes isolating. A recent survey and review of reflective log books of partnership brokers (individuals accredited through the UK-based Partnership Brokers Accreditation Scheme) found that some of the most innovative partnerships involved highly complex contexts, requiring significant and extended negotiations for brokers (Promoting Effective Partnering 2016), confirming challenges noted in the workshop. Workshop participants also

suggested: facilitating (not representing) the voices of people involved in development activities themselves; negotiating longer time frames to promote space for local or informal decision making; recognising the legitimacy of local stakeholders; applying leadership where local leadership is missing; and learning when and how to compromise.

Balancing adeptness in complex and dynamic contexts

While participants understood the subjectivity of practitioners' roles, many described unease about knowing how or when they might be manipulating outcomes or communication when working between different frames of reference. One group raised the question '*are we adept or manipulative?*' They described the risk of manipulating (even without realising) information when acting as a 'go-between' and acknowledged that efforts to understand their own influences are challenging and rarely undertaken. As Kaplan (2002:3) states:

> our way of thinking (and consequently, of seeing) takes place within the contextual landscape of our time… largely unconsciously, as part of the given within which we function. It demands tremendous effort of will to step outside these given parameters, to free ourselves sufficiently…to become conscious of the underlying assumptions we take for granted…'.

Reflective practice, critical for adeptness, was identified as a means to better understand processes that are arguably inherently complex, comprehensive, reflective and analytical' (Partnership Brokers Association 2012:6) and as a way for individuals to continually question their objectivity by understanding the connection between their personal values and role.

Recent literature[2] affirms participants' experience in relation to working politically, adaptively, culturally appropriately, and reflectively in partnerships in order to achieve positive and relevant change. Participants also noted other necessary soft (or non-technical) skills and qualities including: humility, the ability to listen genuinely, commitment to learn from mistakes and while learning (and making mistakes), the ability to 'do no harm' through biases, preferences, skills and connections. As Kaplan (1996:108) notes 'a growing number of developing organisations implies a developing community, while the organisations cannot develop unless the individuals within it are developing'.

Leadership skills related to power and authority

When working in other cultural contexts, achieving change requires individuals to lead from behind, exploiting the privilege of their position in positive ways to facilitate and support local leadership, to provide opportunities for local ownership and to generate genuine trust-based partnerships. Demonstration of leadership qualities when managing complexity is essential for development practitioners. This may mean pushing against unreasonable demands, and deepening understanding of power and authority in relation to development agendas and contexts. Early in a practitioner's career, emphasis is likely to be on understanding and

complying donor requirements. Later, as confidence and understanding increase, participants spoke of increasingly seeking ways to manage more diverse expectations and potentially 'push the envelope' rather than simply deliver what appears to be inappropriate for the sake of compliance. This is linked with awareness of one's own politics and cultural values, as discussed above.

The ability to think and work politically is increasingly understood to be useful for practitioners (Menocal 2014). As noted in Box 1 above, perceptions of power in different cultural contexts require practitioners to identify plural definitions of power and recognise their role in exercising power in these contexts. Other leadership-type skills identified by practitioners included the ability to balance idealism and pragmatism, to identify and negotiate opportunities to bring about positive change, to push back, and to negotiate time frames.

Conclusions

Lack of adaptability within the world of development practice is often critiqued (Green 2012). The experience of the workshop leads us to ask whether the current development system is the right one to address the complex reality of inequality, particularly if it is not reflecting and accommodating the lived experiences of those who navigate this work every day. What would improve the system so that it enables people to work in a way that serves values without creating significant internal, ethical questions or conflict? Such questions reiterate the value and role of leadership and the capacity of leaders to adapt to complexity and disruption.

What does this mean for effectiveness?

The degree to which people succeed as development practitioners is a critical factor in the success of programs and development *effectiveness* overall. Effectiveness is about the capacity of people to be self-reflective, aware, and politically astute as much as it is about technical competence and investment. Individuals are often working in brokering roles, requiring awareness of what they may or may not be manipulating and influencing throughout the development cycle. Effectiveness involves many moving parts. While technical skills and knowledge are highly valued, the skills identified by workshop participants—the ability to make sense of and navigate multiple interests, contexts and values—are just as important parts of the suite of skills needed by practitioners.

What does this mean for inequality?

Development practitioners exercise power and privilege both as individuals and as representatives of organisations or a particular culture. They hold and exercise powers daily and significantly influence whether inequality is reduced or exacerbated. Addressing inequality or enhancing equality requires practitioners to be aware of and understand the explicit and implicit influence they have as individuals, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

Practitioners in a changing age for development have personal and nuanced understanding of their roles and the relationship between these roles and development effectiveness. While their reflections may not be consistent with recent research undertaken by The Guardian,[3] which identified a 'mental health crisis' among humanitarian aid workers, the experiences of workshop participants and the authors suggests broader tensions. Ultimately, workshop discussions signal scope for development organisations and the broader sector to make better use of practitioners' experiences as a core component of increasing development effectiveness and reducing inequality.

Notes

[1] The concept of identity politics generally applies to the political aspects and implications of membership of social groups which experience oppression and seek systemic change of some kind.

[2] Examples include: Doing Development Differently Manifesto 2013, Rhodes 2014, Menocal 2014, Booth and Unsworth 2014, Kelly and Roche 2014, Eyben 2010.

[3] http://.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/23/guardian-research-suggests-mental-health-crisis=among-aid-workers.

References

Booth, D and S Unsworth 2014, *Politically Smart, Locally Led Development*, ODI, www.odi.org/publications/8800-politically-smart-locally-led, accessed 6 June 2016.

Doing Development Differently Manifesto 2013, http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com, accessed 6 June 2016.

Eyben, R 2006, *Relationships for Aid*, Earthscan, London.

Green, D 2012, *From Poverty to Power*, Practical Action, Oxford, UK.

Hofstede, G 1980, *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work-related values*, Sage.

House, R et al. (eds) 2004, *Culture, Leadership and Organisations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*, Sage.

James, R 2001, *Power and Partnership? Experiences of NGO Capacity Building*, INTRAC, Oxford.

Kaplan, A 1996, *The Development Practitioners Handbook*, Pluto Press, London.

Kaplan, A 2002, *Development Practitioners and Social Process; Artists of the Invisible*, Pluto Press, London.

Kelly, L and C Roche, 2014, *Partnerships for Effective Development*, https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/Partnerships-for-Effective-Development.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Lewis, D and D Mosse 2006, *Development Brokers and Translators—The Ethnography of aid and agencies*, Kumarian Press Inc, Bloomfield, USA.

Menocal, AR 2014, *Getting Real About Politics*, Overseas Development Institute, http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8887.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Osland, J 2008, *Global Leadership*, AIB Insights, ehttp://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10 18&context=org_mgmt_pub, accessed 6 June 2016.

Partnership Brokers Association 2012, *What do Partnership Brokers Do? An enquiry into practice*, http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/ 2010/08/What-do-Partnership-Broker-Do.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Porter, B and B Emmens 2009, *Approaches to Staff Care in International NGOs*, People In Aid/InterHealth, www.peopleinaid.org/pool/files/pubs/approaches-to-staff-care-in-international-ngos.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Promoting Effective Partnering 2016, *The Necessity of Trans-formation: Emerging partnership lessons from diverse contexts*, The Partnership Brokers Association, http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/wp-content/uploads/ 2010/08/Emerging-Partnership-Lessons-from-Diverse-Contexts-sm2.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Rhodes, D 2014, *Capacity Across Cultures: Global lessons from Pacific experiences*, Inkpress.

Solanki, H 2015, *Mindfulness and Wellbeing: A shift of emphasis from treatment to prevention*, CHS Alliance, www.chsalliance.org/files/files/Resources/Articles-and-Research/Resource-Mindfulness-and-Wellbeing-2015.pdf, accessed 6 June 2016.

Tennyson, R 2005, *The Brokering Guidebook—Tools for navigating cross sector partnerships*, International Business Leaders Forum, http://thepartneringinitiative.org/ publications/toolbook-series/the-brokering-guidebook/, accessed 6 June 2016.