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CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Participation, empowerment and the recognition of contextual factors such as culture and conflict are widely acknowledged as essential for effective, sustainable development. At the same time Development Studies seeks to identify commonalities across diverse contexts, while organisational legitimacy is derived from normative policy statements. It is argued that this dominant presentation of development approaches in terms of norms has resulted in sensitivity to context not being sufficiently taught, discussed or theorised. It would appear it is widely assumed to be instinctively implemented by agencies, but it is argued that this cannot be assumed and requires renewed attention. This paper traces an evolution of thinking about context sensitivity in development, starting from single-pathway notions of economic development after WWII which described a linear process from traditional society to modern Western-like nation. It notes: the recognition that every country faces a unique developmental environment; the calls from developing nations for greater sensitivity to their context; the recent emphasis on cultural diversity; and the prioritisation of community-led development and partnership with local organisations. The paper suggests that on the one hand the global development dialogue has moved past universal prescriptions to the recognition of diversity, multiple paths and unique contexts. On the other hand, it argues that diversity is still often treated as a deviation, while lip service is paid to difference and only superficial variation is permitted. It is argued that despite recent emphasis on highly participatory development, empowerment and partnership, the ways in which international
agencies themselves still need to contextualise their actions is overlooked. This paper documents the ways in which powerful forces still drive both development theory and practice towards normative approaches, calls for more theoretical consideration of the roles and dynamics of context sensitive development, and makes some preliminary suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

No one has seriously advocated universal policy prescriptions for international development, other than in broad terms, for decades, and this paper certainly does not suggest otherwise. Participation, empowerment and the recognition of contextual factors such as culture and conflict are very widely acknowledged to be essential for effective sustainable development. On the other hand, powerful forces still do drive both development theory and practice towards normative approaches. In seeking to identify commonalities across diverse contexts, Development Studies has sought at least broadly applicable lessons, if not universal principles and approaches to development. At the same time, large international agencies derive much of their legitimacy from key organisational mission and strategy statements, resulting in their being held publicly accountable against such normalised criteria.

This paper argues that this dominant presentation of development in terms of norms has resulted in insufficient articulation of how external development agencies ought to tailor what they do to specific contexts. This gap in the literature might be interpreted as assuming that such sensitivity to context is something agencies do (or should do) instinctively, that it is being implemented well by agencies, and that it is not necessary to be studied in greater depth. This paper contends that sensitivity to context cannot be assumed, that it often has not been done well, and that it therefore does require renewed attention and theorisation.

This paper is divided into seven sections. The next section traces the evolution of the idea of context sensitivity in the development literature, noting that the origins of the concept in modernity saw development as a single-pathway linear process from traditional to modern society. Section Three then examines the various aspects of context sensitivity which are well reflected in the Development Studies literature, namely, "culture
sensitive development”, “conflict sensitive development” and “development in fragile states”. Section Four suggests that the primary model and theory of practice adopted by the development community in an attempt to ensure context sensitivity can be broadly defined as participatory development. The underlying assumption implicit in this model is that emphasising local knowledge, participation, partnership and community leadership will make decision-making inherently sensitive to context. However, despite the strengths of this model, it is argued that this model is insufficient in itself to ensure context sensitivity and contextualisation. Three concerns of the inherent assumptions are raised in Section Five: (1) whether participants are sufficiently empowered to contextualise; (2) whether participants are sufficiently aware of macro-contextual factors to fully contextualise; and, (3) that this approach largely ignores the role International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) retain in context sensitivity as they work from outside, meaning that such an approach minimises or ignores the sensitivity agencies require in their dealings with other stakeholders. Section Six then illustrates these issues with the concrete example of Burma/Myanmar, while the Conclusion calls for renewed attention on context in Development Studies and proposes some thoughts about the roles of the different development actors in context sensitive development.

HISTORY OF CONTEXT SENSITIVITY IN DEVELOPMENT THOUGHT

The realisation of the need for development to be sensitive to the context is today widespread; indeed, it is an almost implicit presupposition in much development thinking and writing. This is widely reflected at all levels, in organisations of all sizes and approach. However, arriving at this level of conceptual agreement has been a lengthy process, and this theoretical agreement is still subject to strong normative forces opposing effective contextualisation of development in practice.

Origins of the Idea of Development

The dominant Western ideas about development are founded on the linear, cause-and-effect ideas of modernity (Bastin 2010; Ife 2010). The “development era” really began in the mid to late 19th century, during the heyday of modernism, and it has been argued that the concept drew
heavily on an evolutionary outlook that redefined the history of humanity from a cyclical, seasonal conception into ideas of linear progress, growth and development (Nisbet 1969; Rist 2002). Either way, the German economist Bruno Hildebrand first formalised the idea of linear “stages” of economic growth in 1848 (Fonseca 2010), a theme famously taken up by Schumpeter (1962 [1911]). Development was at that time a doctrine the European colonial powers used to justify intervention, arguing that “higher races” had duties towards “lower races” to share the benefits of progress via a “civilising mission” (Bernstein 2000; Rist 2002).

A second, more contemporary impetus for development came from post-WWII reconstruction, the formation of the United Nations and decolonisation. Throughout the Cold War offers of development assistance were wielded as tools to persuade poorer countries into one of the Cold War ideological camps, as was well illustrated by Harry Truman’s famous 1947 Truman Doctrine speech (Kingsbury 2008). Rostow’s highly influential Stages of Economic Growth (1960) epitomises US Cold War modernist development ideology, postulating five stages of economic growth from traditional society through to a mass-consumption-based economy. His model clearly described development as a linear sequence of universal stages which all countries must pass through in the process of economic growth, and proposed that “take-off” is achieved when rapid culture change transforms traditional values and behaviours into more developed, Western-like ones. These ideas became the conventional development wisdom during this period (Peet and Hartwick 2009; Acre and Long 2000).

Challenges to the Linear Model

Hirschman (1958) was one of the earliest to challenge this model and argue for country-specific solutions. This theme was taken up in Seers’ (1969) seminal work, which redefined development from economic advancement measured in terms of national product into “the realization of the potential of human personality”. Economic growth, he argued, could as equally contribute to social and political problems as it could solve them. Development required a major re-evaluation. Scholars immediately contributed complementary arguments such as: that “underdeveloped” countries today face an entirely different task with little in common to the challenges faced by, say, Britain or France in the 19th century (Seers 1970); that a transfer of intuitions or organisational structures from the West to developing countries can inhibit development rather than be helpful if they are not adapted to the local context (Streeten 1970b); that
development entails “all kinds of issues which cannot be solved by any
dogmatic prescription” (Marris 1970); and that the challenge is finding the
appropriate means relevant to each specific context (Streeten 1970a).

The following year Simon Kuznets won a Nobel Prize for an analysis
demonstrating that underdeveloped countries possess characteristics and
exist in contexts vastly different from those faced by industrialised
countries before they developed (Fonseca 2010). His argument helped put
an end to the simplistic view that all countries go through the same linear
stages of development.

In the early 1970s the ILO began arguing for development targeting
basic needs. Many of the basic needs could only be defined contextually,
and cultural fit became seen as an essential component of sustainable
development. The inaugural UN Development Programme Human
Development Report (1990) sought to move development thinking from
indicators of economic growth to the idea of human progress and well-
being. It argued that economic growth often fails to translate into
development, that the expansion of wealth is only a means to an end and
that increased income is but one aspect of the development people seek.
This shift was based largely on the pioneering work of Noble Prize winner
Amartya Sen, whose capability approach presented development as an
expansion of “capabilities”, creating the freedom to achieve or be certain
(see Sen 1999, 1993). These development ideas clearly suggest multiple
pathways, are person focused, and are therefore very contextual.

As they have gained a voice in the development dialogue, developing
nations have likewise called for greater emphasis on context. For example,
The Declaration on the Right to Development, adopted by the General
Assembly of the United Nations in 1986, was primarily the inspiration and
agenda of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and was initially
articulated by developing countries in relation to the call for a New
International Economic Order (Gouwenberg 2009). The preamble to this
1986 Declaration describes development as:

a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process ... [for]
the entire population and of all individuals ... a many-faceted concept
which encompasses the whole human being in all the aspects of her or his
basic rights ... in the context within which the individual must live ... [and]
the community to which she or he belongs (UN 1991 article 17)

The emphasis on multi-faceted development in a specific context is
clear.
The realisation that development needs to be sensitive to the context is today widespread. This is reflected at all levels, in organisations of all sizes and using a variety of approaches. For example, the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* places particular emphasis on country-specific strategies, recognises diversity and “offers an implicit apology for [past] one-size-fits-all programs” (Shepherd 2001). As another example, a comprehensive review of AusAID’s programs by the Office of Development Effectiveness found the first factor for program effectiveness was “understanding country context” (Davidson 2010). “There is, and must be, room to be flexible to the country context.”

Cross-cultural relations [are] central to the way in which [international development] NGOs operate ... the diversity of contexts in which NGOs operate [and] the importance of understanding those contexts. Assumptions ... are not necessarily transferable from one place to another, and misunderstandings are often rooted in cultural differences ... development interventions [must] be based on a deep understanding of the local context. (Brehm 2000)

**ASPECTS OF CONTEXT SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

In saying that “context sensitive development” has become widely accepted in Development Studies, we need to note that when used (as in the previous examples) the term “context” is rarely defined, appears used in the broadest possible sense, applying to whatever the author wants it to apply, and is not connected to any discussion of the roles and dynamics such an idea might imply. A survey of the literature is in order to see what aspects of context have been studied in some detail. Foremost within these is the idea of sensitivity to culture.

**Culture Sensitive Development**

“Culture” is one of the most complicated and disputed words in the English language (Williams, R 1993), with many conceptual problems stemming from widespread use without agreed common meaning (Allen 2000). “Anthropologists are neither totally precise, nor totally consistent, in their usage of this crucial concept” (Keesing and Strathern 1998).
Nonetheless, there is widespread recognition that culture, broadly conceived of as some sort of generally shared patterns of behaviour, values and symbols, is the single greatest feature of most local contexts (for more detailed definitions see Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). This understanding of the importance of culture has propelled culture sensitivity to the fore in development thinking over the last couple of decades.

During the 1950s and 1960s, community development became centrally concerned with culture (Braden and Mayo 1999), however, the purpose of this attention on culture was to find ways to transform behaviours and values into more Western forms, not to implement what we now describe as a culture sensitive approach (Williams, L 2004). Economic development of the era simply saw traditional culture as a barrier to development, and considered that rapid cultural change was integral to economic development (e.g. Hoselitz 1952; Hagen 1957). This view was further reflected in Daniel Lerner’s 1958 Modernisation text, *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Over the last two decades, however, perspectives have changed and culture has re-emerged at the heart of mainstream development dialogue (Radcliffe 2006a).

This is easily illustrated by even a very brief survey of discussion emanating from United Nations agencies. For example, in 1991 UNESCO established the World Commission on Culture and Development, then in 1995 published *Our Creative Diversity* in which UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar observed that development efforts had often failed “because the importance of the human factor ... culture – had been underestimated in many development projects” (UNESCO 1995). “Development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul. Economic development in its full flowering is part of a people’s culture”, the report adds. In 1998 the World Bank joined in with a conference entitled Culture in Sustainable Development, during which the Bank president remarked, “You simply cannot have development without a recognition of culture... without cultural continuity, without a preservation of the things that matter in a society” (Wolfensohn 1998). The World Bank went on to host a follow-up Culture Counts conference in 1999.

Even this superficial survey illustrates that culture sensitivity has now become an integral consideration in the development dialogue. This renewed emphasis on culture has far-reaching implications and constitutes
a major challenge to rethink development, only some of the issues of which are being fully addressed at this time in the development discourse (Hettne 2001 in Radcliffe 2006b; Worsley 1999).

**Conflict Sensitive Development**

A second aspect of context sensitivity addressed in the literature is sensitivity to conflict. The term “conflict sensitive development” is an even more recent conception, but has nonetheless been quickly adopted.

Momentum for conflict sensitive development began with the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s publication of *Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation* (OECD 1997). This report represented a significant shift in thinking, recognising that development has the capacity to contribute proactively to conflict prevention and peace-building by explicitly addressing root causes and strengthening the capacity of society to manage conflict without violence. The term “conflict sensitive development” was introduced by a consortium of INGOs in a briefing paper to this committee (International Alert et al. 2000). They note that humanitarian intervention in contexts which are contested or in conflict is always highly political, thus conflict sensitive development places an emphasis on dialogue, mediation and full participation by all actors. There must be a balance between human rights, the achievement of peace and sustainable development, and ensuring injustice and inequality are not entrenched.

Conflict Sensitivity, as the consortium are now known, define “conflict sensitivity” as development which remains aware of local conflict and divisions:

systematically taking into account both the positive and negative impact of interventions, in terms of conflict or peace dynamics, on the contexts in which they are undertaken, and, conversely, the impact of these contexts on the interventions. (Conflict Sensitivity 2009)

It is widely recognised that conflict inhibits development, with the link between poverty and conflict well demonstrated (Clarke 2006; Kaldor 1999). Development work is more arduous and dangerous in conflict contexts and it requires greater flexibility and adaptability (Kreimer et al. 1998). Social structures, ethnic divisions, poverty and autocratic political
systems can all fuel conflict, so the nature and delivery mechanisms of development can have serious ramifications (Clements 2006).

“Human security” is a concept gaining prominence in both Conflict Studies and Development Studies, and involves both freedom from fear and freedom from want (Clements 2006). “Conflict sensitive development” seeks to facilitate development in ways which reduce rather than inflame any sensitivities that might otherwise result in increased reason for fear. Sensitivity to conflict is thus essential to effective development in divided societies, especially contexts prone to the use of violence, those experiencing ongoing conflict and those recently post-conflict.

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium now represents most major INGOs, and has produced a manual, Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding (2004). The need for conflict sensitive development is thus now widely recognised.

Fragile States

The final aspect of context sensitive development discussed in the Development Studies literature is sensitivity to state fragility. Writing about development in fragile states is only very recent, and scholars note a considerable gap in the literature on effective development adapted to such contexts (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2008; McGillivray and Feeny 2008; UNU 2008).

The OECD recently released two key documents on the subject of development in fragile states (OECD 2007a, 2007b). State fragility is understood as arising primarily:

from weaknesses in the dynamic political process through which citizens’ expectations of the state and state expectations of citizens are reconciled and brought into equilibrium with the state’s capacity to deliver services. (OECD 2007a)

The focus is therefore on state building and national reform to build state institutions, in order to overcome issues connected with weak governance, emerging from conflict or other temporary fragility. The central objective of development in these states is to “build effective, legitimate, and resilient state institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people to promote sustained development” (OECD 2007a). Their recommendations include: take context as the starting point;
do no harm; focus on state building; prioritise prevention; recognise links between political, security and development objectives; promote non-discrimination; align with local priorities; coordinate between international actors; act fast, but stay engaged long enough; and avoid pockets of exclusion (OECD 2007b).

The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) now has a project on Fragility and Development (UNU 2008). Most fragile states are in conflict or have just emerged from conflict (AusAID 2010; OECD 2007a; UNU 2008). This context of contestation, together with either weak or recalcitrant governance, results in the international donor community having grave concerns about the prospects of effective poverty reduction in fragile states (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2008). Donors and agencies restrict aid funding to fragile states. However, critics argue that their poor understanding of local contexts means that when they do engage, they very often appear at the wrong time, with the wrong attitude and operate in ways that actually undermine development (Browne 2007).

Research has shown most fragile states are under-aided, meaning that they could efficiently absorb greater amounts of aid than they receive currently (McGillivray and Feeny 2008). Likewise, experience demonstrates that aid can achieve results in fragile states that no other form of engagement can achieve, and that while real and sustained reform must come largely from within a country, aid can nonetheless still be effective even in very poor policy environments (Anderson 2005). It also shows that reform cannot be imposed through aid conditionality, while disengagement from fragile states who do not engage in reform can be disastrous.

Thus the need for changed approaches in response to the special context of fragile states is now well recognised, but there is still a large gap in the literature on effective development adapted to these contexts.

PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT AS CONTEXT SENSITIVITY

The primary means by which Development Studies and practice endeavour to ensure that development is context sensitive is through participatory, beneficiary-led or beneficiary-driven development. It is believed that local knowledge, participation, partnership, empowerment and community leadership will make decision-making inherently sensitive to context. There is a certain validity in this assumption.
Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), argues that traditional processes of teaching in which a teacher transfers knowledge to students is both ineffective and a form of oppression. Learning, according to Freire, should be a process of people rethinking their own assumptions and acting upon their own ideas, not consuming the ideas of others. This paradigm has become the foundation underlying participatory approaches to development.

Robert Chambers, building on this foundation, has mainstreamed participatory approaches to development. For Chambers, the root issue behind poverty is not a lack of knowledge by communities of what they need to do, but a powerlessness to do anything about their situation (Chambers 1983). He therefore popularised the idea of empowerment through highly participatory, beneficiary-led or beneficiary-driven development as the basis for successful sustained development. Many quickly agreed. Participation, he argues, empowers “those who are most marginalized, powerless and poor to achieve a better life for themselves” (Chambers 2005). Edwards (1989) provocatively suggested in *The Irrelevance of Development Studies* that development research was having little impact on poverty because it thought in terms of transfer of goods, skills or information and had failed to come to grips with local knowledge. Like Chambers, he advocated “popular participation” as the means for taking into account knowledge and contextual factors known to the locals, but often overlooked by outsiders, as the only real basis for successful development.

Participation is now central to development theory and has become widely accepted as a minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes.

It was only in the 1990s that it [participation] entered almost every field development activity and became a preoccupation on a global scale, preached about and promoted by lenders, donors, INGOs and governments alike. By the turn of the century, the words participatory and participation were embedded in development speak. ... in the early years of the 21st century, participation, in name if not in reality, is now part of almost every development activity. (Chambers 2005)

One way of highlighting how integral ideas about participation have become to development is by looking at Korten's (1990) well-known typology of four generations of development INGOs: (1) relief and welfare, (2) community development, (3) sustainable development and (4) people’s movements. Clarke (2009) notes that the implicit assumption within these stylised typologies is that community participation increases throughout the progression, and that this is inherently right and proper. It is assumed that interventions with a high degree of community participation and ownership are more likely to have a sustained impact because of: better identification of development needs and their causes; better account taken of local resources and strengths, thus less reliance on external inputs; and better management of the project through community decision-making, which will then more likely continue after the external funding has ceased (Dale 2004; Uphoff et al. 1998). However, as we move through this progression, from first and second generation NGOs to third and fourth generation ones, the more consideration of context has moved from being a deliberate and conscious facet INGOs must remain mindful of to something it is assumed recipients inherently facilitate.

INADEQUATE CONTEXT SENSITIVITY

Concerns with Participatory Development as Contextualisation

Despite its strengths, there are critics who express deep concerns about this participation-empowerment-ownership-partnership model. Guijt and Shah (1998), for example, are concerned that the notion of “community” has been under-theorised, with communities treated as discrete and socially homogenous entities. Intra-community divisions have been overlooked, and the positive contribution of external agents has been underplayed. Seeking a single, coherent, consensual, community view can thus reinforce the very power relations they seek to overcome. Cooke and Kothari (2001) are concerned participation methodologies can reinforce inequalities and lead to unjust outcome. They argue that participatory approaches involve the “illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power”. They suggest, for example, that the popular consensus-oriented Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) process presupposes a binary perception of power in which the community is seen as a homogeneous unit of “lowers” subordinated to the power of external “uppers”, a
perception that is prone to reinforce power relations within the community rather than empower the marginalised. It is also said to lead to “conservatism, convenience, and risk aversion” (Cleaver 2001).

The fact that the grass-roots participation-empowerment-ownership-partnership model shifts primary responsibility for considering the context from the development agency onto the recipients is both a large part of its strength, as well as potentially its greatest weakness. The model promotes contextualisation to the extent that the local participants/partners understand and are genuinely empowered to address contextual factors. Essential aspects of ensuring the success of this model therefore involve many levels of empowerment and capacity development, from human rights awareness to organisational capacity building, which is why these aspects of development receive major emphasis in much development practice and theorising today.

The model does, however, have the potential to limit contextualisation where: (a) participants are not sufficiently empowered to fully take their context into consideration, (b) participants are not sufficiently aware of the macro-contextual factors to actively take them into consideration and (c) the need for context sensitivity by INGOs themselves in relating to other stakeholders at a more macro-context level is ignored.

Participants often really have only limited freedom to contextualise. Empowerment for effective contextualisation is far more difficult to achieve than is commonly acknowledged. For example, on the back of its major emphasis on cultural diversity during the 1990s, in 2002 the World Bank established a program of Civic Engagement, Empowerment and Respect for Diversity. While the aim was to empower recipients to contextualise, an evaluation of the program found that the Bank’s monitoring and evaluation systems prevented the intended freedom to adapt (Brunner 2004). It was found that genuine empowerment would require the freedom for monitoring and evaluation indicators themselves to be tailored to measure contextualised programs’ goals, and therefore that specifying indicators externally in advance – considered necessary for program accountability – inhibited the recipients from making the adaptations necessary for genuinely context sensitive development. Despite the rhetoric, the Bank’s systems stifled attempts towards more adaptive and context sensitive approaches. Likewise, in difficult contexts the recipients may not be sufficiently empowered to challenge local
political, social or economic power hierarchies to contextualise beyond the vested interests of those elites.

This paper, therefore, contends that discussion of context sensitivity has largely been subsumed into the participation-empowerment model, and in the process important discussion of the role of the development agency in contextualisation has been largely overlooked in Development Studies.

**Normative Forces in Development**

Despite at least three decades of well-argued critique calling for human-scale, bottom-up, contextual development rather than top-down projects, many critics suggest there are still significant forces towards normative implementation of development and against the empowerment of local participants/partners. Critics highlight the frequency with which the same mistakes continue to be made (e.g. Ife 2010).

Diversity is seen as a deviation from the central axis of progress and so must be tamed and refined ... While paying lip-service to "difference" – the superficial characteristics and varying histories of groups – development programmes, including those of international NGOs, have never been patient with diversity. (Murphy 2000)

One reason for this is that Development Studies has sought to identify commonalities across diverse contexts in order to ascertain at least broadly applicable lessons, if not universal principles and approaches to development. As a consequence, international development is most commonly presented in terms of norms.

Other reasons behind this pressure narrowing development towards normative practices and approaches were explored recently in a series of conversations between the Institute of Development Studies team and the leadership teams from eight Big International NGOs (BINGOs). It was observed that while BINGOs aspire for their organisation-wide vision, mission and strategy documents to be framed only in the most general terms, and to empower their field staff to translate these into "more situated and contextual strategic goals", such organisational documents are characterised by Western liberal values and normative assumptions about behaviour and practice (Shutt 2009). For the BINGOs, translating these normative statements into context specific applications would mean:
different approaches may need to co-exist within one organisation, jeopardising normative legitimacy as well as raising operational and “brand” problems. (Shutt 2009).

It is also recognised that INGOs, as unelected organisations, derive much of their legitimacy from these public mission and strategy statements. This has the significant consequence that both supporters and critics evaluate INGO effectiveness against what are perceived as universal standards articulated in these organisational documents, minimising their ability to be sensitive to local contexts (Ossewaarde et al. 2008). There is strong evidence that there is a tension within INGOs between “field-orientated” staff who advocate the need for flexibility in response to the local context, and “organisation-oriented” staff who seek consistent polity across the organisation (Suzuki 1998). The culturally sensitive views and practices of national staff of INGOs and local NGO partners also often conflict with INGO institutional values or approaches, leading to feelings of models being “imposed” from the outside (Shutt 2009).

**EXAMPLE: INGO DEVELOPMENT IN BURMA/MYANMAR**

This paper has raised three concerns about the limitations of the participatory model as the means of contextualisation. These concerns are well illustrated by the specific example of the development work conducted by INGOs operating inside Burma/Myanmar.

We raised the concern over whether participants are sufficiently empowered to contextualise, both in the face of the INGO and of the local elite. In Burma/Myanmar there is widespread criticism that the vested interests of the military, regime-connected elements such as local members of the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) and the Burman Buddhist majority consistently override the interests of other less empowered peoples. In communities with a military presence, mixed political views or ethno-religious diversity, so long as the current military-political context remains intact will even a majority of a more marginalised societal group have a free voice to advocate contextual programs in their interest, especially if what they advocate is not in the interest of the more empowered?
Our second concern was whether participants are sufficiently aware of macro-contextual factors to actively take them into appropriate consideration in contextualisation. The UNDP *Human Development Report* (2010) ranks Burma/Myanmar as the fifth least free press in the world, exceeded only by Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan and Iran. This indicates the comparative ignorance most local people have of even national, let alone international, factors affecting their situation. It also raises the question of how well local, especially rural, communities in Burma/Myanmar could appropriately contextualise programs to fit with international donor attitudes including donor-country sanctions, or to fit with recent national political policy reversals due to effective advocacy. Clearly the implementing INGO or agency has a major role to play in ensuring appropriate contextualisation in such a context.

Our third concern was that this model minimises or ignores the context sensitivity INGOs themselves need in their relationships with other stakeholders at a more macro-context level. In Burma/Myanmar, relationships must be carefully balanced all round for agencies working in the narrow space between an authoritarian regime suspicious of their motives and an international community with deep concerns that development assistance does not prolong the rule of a regime which abuses rights and freedoms. It is not that INGOs and other development agencies are not contextualising their relationships with the various stakeholders, but that Development Studies has little if anything to offer in terms of models or theorisation about this vital process.

An example of pressure towards a normative institutional implementation of development raised with the author in personal interviews with INGO leaders in Burma/Myanmar during 2009 was the common INGO policy of deliberately rotating key international staff between fields every few years, to strengthen common organisational culture and share practical insights learned by comparisons across different contexts. This was perceived by a number of field-oriented senior staff to undermine their efforts to contextualise relationships and programming.
CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A MODEL OF CONTEXT SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT?

Radcliffe (2006b) calls for a more detailed understanding of the ways in which various actors bring context into development, and of how, when and where they do so, and their differing relationships within the context. She argues that if actors and institutions remain invisible, responsibility for roles and change cannot be attributed to actors with agency. Having noted the lack of serious consideration of the roles of INGOs in contextualisation in the Development Studies literature, it may be possible to make a few tentative suggestions towards a model of context sensitive development.

The participation-empowerment model provides a solid base for understanding the role of the recipients of development assistance, provided adequate empowerment and capacity building can be ensured. If not, INGO country office and field staff, particularly nationals employed by the INGO, may need to take an active role in working through contextualisation issues on their behalf – or may even need to compromise by implementing programs based on educated best-guesses at contextualisation.

What the model really fails to provide, though, is an understanding of the role of INGO development workers. Development agencies and workers seek to be agents of planned social change in specific contexts. Culbert (1976) proposes a model through which conscious agents can direct social change in institutions and communities by means of “consciousness-raising”, a process of assisting people recognise how the current system works, identify what it is that concerns them, understand their relationship with the system, formulate alternatives and identify ways to effect change for the group. This may provide a useful start.

Schineller (1990) insists the first step for outside agents of contextualisation and culture change is a need for them to de-Westernise their ideas back to underlying important values, acknowledging the tension in determining what is normative, thus unchangeable, and what can be contextualised. He stresses that the agent role requires patience and a willingness to allow others to accept or reject their values and ideas, otherwise they become intruders by insisting on the ways others adopt universal norms.
Kraft (1979, 1996, 2005) proposes a comprehensive model of directed culture change which recognises that change regularly occurs due to outside influence. He draws a useful distinction between the roles of outsider advocates and insider receptors and innovators. The outsider advocates’ role is to plant seeds of ideas, raise awareness and introduce alternatives. The insider receptors are key opinion leaders within the reference group, occupying a position enabling them to grant or withhold permission for ideas to enter their “communicational space”. Receptors evaluate the message in the light of past experience and choose which ideas to pick up and which to ignore. Where they adopt an idea, they become innovators of the idea into the new context.

Suzuki (1998) and Shutt (2009) have already alerted us to a division within INGOs between “organisation-oriented” staff, who seek consistent polity across the organisation and are often based at the head office, and “field-orientated” staff, many of whom are nationals and who advocate the need for maximum flexibility in response to the local context. Rather than seeing this division as a negative factor, it is possible that it may be constructive to recognise that as the INGO’s head and country offices exist in different contexts, they therefore have different roles to play as agents in planned social change.

Putting these ideas together, a possible simple conceptualisation of the type Radcliffe (2006b) asked for emerges, a model of the roles the different development actors play in at different times in context sensitive development.
This simple model proposes that the primary role of the local community and local partner recipients is to innovate (contextualise) to the micro-context they are embedded in, to the extent that they are empowered to do so. They may also be able to act as innovators within the macro-contexts of national and international-regional socio-political realities, if sufficiently empowered and if their awareness of and profile within this larger context gives them a voice.

The INGO country office and field staff have two roles, just as they have two profiles. Within the micro-context they advocate change to the local community and local partner recipients from their reservoir of generalised approaches borrowed from other contexts, after de-contextualising these ideas as much as possible. However, they are also primary insiders within the macro-context and therefore have a role as insider innovators within the national and international-regional socio-political contexts.
The INGO head office, which exists well outside the micro-context and largely even outside the macro-context surrounding the recipient community, serves as an advocate of change (rather than innovator and initiator) primarily to their INGO country office – again from their reservoir of generalised approaches borrowed from other contexts and after de-contextualising these ideas as much as possible.

Regardless of the usefulness of this simple model, this paper has argued that Development Studies has moved well beyond universal policy prescriptions for development and arrived at a realisation of the need for development to be sensitive to context. In implementation of this Development Studies and practice have primarily embraced participatory development, however it has been argued that despite the strengths of this model, on its own it is insufficient to ensure contextualisation. Concerns were raised as to whether participants are sufficiently empowered to contextualise and whether they are appropriately aware of macro-contextual factors, and that this approach largely ignores the role of INGOs in context sensitivity as they work from outside. What was particularly identified was the lack of discussion in Development Studies of the sensitivity which agencies themselves require in their dealings with other stakeholders within the macro-context.

This paper calls for renewed attention on context within Development Studies, and suggests in particular that far more discussion is required on the way INGO country offices and field staff should be involved in contextualisation, to both micro- and macro-contexts.

REFERENCES


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