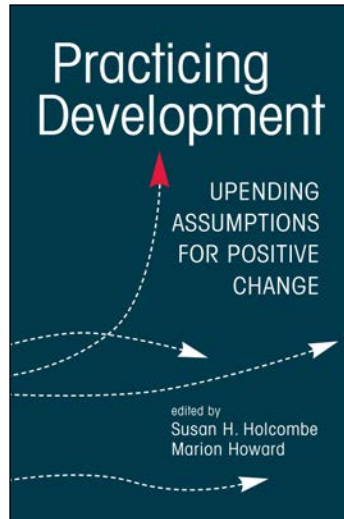


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# Practicing Development: Upending Assumptions for Positive Change

edited by  
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and Marion Howard

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# 1

## Practicing Development

*Susan H. Holcombe  
and Marion Howard*

**Government, multilateral, and philanthropic efforts** since the end of World War II have invested financial, managerial, and intellectual resources in the mission to produce “development” and reduce poverty. More recently, attention has also been paid to fostering human well-being and dignity and to conserving the natural environment. Yet the fruits of these efforts have rarely been examined from the perspective of those living in poverty and inequality, the very people who feel the effects of this development. In this book, we argue that we’ve been doing development upside down. The perspectives, policies, and processes of development have been dominated by organizations and actors from the industrialized world who have built an industry centered on the distribution and management of foreign aid. But development cannot be imposed, and foreign assistance is not development. Aid can be helpful, but it can also be harmful to countries, communities, and their social, political, and natural environments—smothering or destroying capacities and assuring lack of sustainability.

Yes, there have been signal successes in reducing poverty and inequality, improving health and education, and drawing some attention to connections between environmental degradation and development that is *not* sustainable. With instructive exceptions, these gains have too often been top-down interventions that may not be effective or sustainable. The development industry’s past and present are rooted in a model of delivering and receiving foreign assistance. In this model, rich-country donors of the Global North, institutional and individual, are the “doers,” giving aid to the “done-tos” in the Global South. This relationship needs to be turned on its head so that impoverished communities, civil society, and Southern governments become the doers. The chapters in this book explore this

problem and suggest new directions for practitioners from both developing and industrialized countries.

### **New Directions**

The idea for this book emerged from the editors' experiences. Together, we have well over half a century of development practice, ranging from the village level to large agency headquarters, as well as thirty-plus years of experience teaching midcareer practitioners from developing and industrialized countries in a hands-on master's program in sustainable international development. Using our experience gained from practicing, teaching, and learning from students, colleagues, and a variety of actors in the field, we frame the key challenges that face development practice today. We also rely on the independent voices of thoughtful practitioners with experience in both donor and recipient development organizations.

We start with two chapters that lay out the current context of international development and provide background for the many chapters from development practitioners that follow. Chapter 2, written by both of us, sets the stage with a look at the contradictions and complexities that constrain development. We argue that despite good intentions, development practice has been dominated by donors and donor-imposed theories of development. Development has become an industry focused on feeding itself, an enterprise in which survival of its organizations too often takes precedence over sincere aspirations for development.

In Chapter 3, Marion Howard explores the meaning of sustainable development and how we have organized globally to achieve sustainable development. Basing her analysis on her decades of work in recipient organizations, she looks at some of the systems within the development industry that keep us from achieving effective development.

In Part 1 (Chapters 4 through 9), the contributors explore the vision and values practitioners bring to development, as well as the nature of the gap between our ideals and practice. Seasoned practitioners, working in a variety of development fields, situations, and locations, take a strategic perspective on the changing development landscape and the persistence of poverty, inequality, exclusion, and mismanagement of the environment. Four of these authors are from industrialized countries and two are from less developed areas. All have a critical understanding of the changing landscape and a strategic vision for the future of development practice. Drawing on their decades of experience, these six authors offer their reflections on development practice in the past and consider where we might find ideas and inspiration for change for the future.

In Chapter 4, Laurence Simon offers a series of stories that plunge us into the philosophy of development and the ethical dilemmas inherent in

“First World” practitioner engagement in developing countries. His tales ask us, as people of privilege, to confront our own perceptions and to listen to and respect other perspectives. He examines what this means for training development practitioners and recounts his firsthand experiences setting up a graduate program in sustainable international development.

In Chapter 5, Vinya Ariyaratne tells the story of Sri Lanka’s Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, which, over its sixty-year history, built on traditional values of justice and community to reach more than 15,000 of Sri Lanka’s 38,000 villages and improve the lives of more than 4 million people. Sarvodaya’s philosophy of social equity, sharing, and governance through participatory democracy is key to its growth and impact. Ariyaratne also addresses scaling up, learning, and resilience through wars, natural disasters, and funding challenges.

In Chapter 6, Thomas Dichter raises direct, challenging questions about the aid business, examining the role that donor-country practitioners have played in the world of development and should play in development practice going forward. He looks at the industry that development has become and makes clear in his assessment that much education for development professionals is training them to maintain the business of development.

Patrick Awuah, in Chapter 7, makes the case that young Africans educated in ethics, innovation, and entrepreneurship and armed with courage and passion can challenge rampant corruption and be innovative and entrepreneurial. Awuah founded and leads Ashesi University in Ghana, which offers a world-class education grounded in critical thinking and risk taking, not in traditional rote learning. Ashesi tackles head-on the challenges of corruption to real development, emphasizing integrity in its classrooms and culture.

In Chapter 8, Tundi Agardy looks at connections between marine conservation and human well-being to remind us that a sound environment is the foundation for sustained development and that without attention to social, economic, and environmental facets of sustainability, results of economic development are temporary. Agardy considers the sometimes contradictory approaches of conservationists and development practitioners, and she discusses the movement toward holistic solutions rooted in the local situation.

In Chapter 9, Raymond Offenheiser argues that the roles of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) in the development industry must and are changing. Instead of delivering basic services, INGOs need to focus on changing the systems and structures that have allowed poverty and social exclusion to persist. Offenheiser uses the example of Oxfam’s work on extractive industries, which linked global advocacy and local community support, to illustrate the INGO role of “leading from behind” that enables civil society organizations to take over the work and sustain it.

In Part 2, Chapters 10 through 16 move to practice in the here and now, examining how practitioners are exploring opportunities to transform devel-

opment. Most contributions come from authors from the Global South who are active on the ground, planning and implementing change strategies in differing but constraining circumstances. Some contributors bring decades of experience; others are relatively young professionals working to make an impact. These authors focus on approaches that are changing the way development is done and explore where we might find inspiration and opportunities for change, and what we can do as practitioners to move these approaches in new and positive directions.

In Chapter 10, Christian Velasquez Donaldson draws from nearly a decade of advocating for systemic reform at the World Bank on behalf of civil society to look at the Bank's changing role. He delves into some of the challenges that international financial institutions (IFIs), especially the World Bank, face and how they shape ideas and approaches to sustainable development. He considers the complexities of development, looks at the constant tension inside institutions with their internal politics and power struggles, and identifies the need for empathy and dedication to the human side of development.

In Chapter 11, Esther Kamau examines positive opportunities for good governance in the devolution of authority and responsibility to the county level, assessing the accomplishments that can flow from seizing opportunities. She chronicles the experience of young, educated, committed officials in counties in Kenya who are using new constitutional provisions to engage civic participation in planning, implementing, and taking ownership of development interventions.

In Chapter 12, Agustin Madrigal Bulnes, Andrea Savage Tejada, and Joshua Ellsworth describe their ongoing work on watershed restoration and rural livelihoods in Central Mexico. They identify four practical strategies they use to improve effectiveness and sustainability of their work, each of which has worked over the long term within unpredictable and complex situations.

Elkanah Odembo, in Chapter 13, challenges African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to go beyond implementing projects that deliver services to communities and move to influencing and shaping policies that affect development and its sustainability. He considers the need for independent funding, transparency, accountability, and, most of all, passionate and committed leadership, if African NGOs are to assume new roles in sustainable development.

In Chapter 14, Lu Lei describes the Chinese approach to poverty reduction and its incipient attempts to protect environmental health. China is a new actor in international development and, through its own efforts, has achieved the largest reduction in poverty seen in recent times. Lu Lei describes both the top-down setting of poverty reduction goals and the local mechanisms and accountability systems used to meet change objectives.

In Chapter 15, Fanny Howard and Rixcie Newball relate how a local community and an indigenous-led regional government agency worked together to use the power of international and national law and policy to fight a major threat to their natural resource base and traditional livelihoods.

Chapter 16 includes four microcases from development practice that illustrate how committed leadership and new roles of national and international NGOs can work. Pallavi Gupta explains how a “bridging” organization helped bring an innovative women’s health and sanitation project to scale in India. Sarah Jane Holcombe describes the work of one innovative individual, Thailand’s Mechai Viravaidya, who succeeded in catalyzing attitudinal and behavioral changes relative to HIV/AIDS and family planning in Thailand by using culturally appropriate approaches. Lu Lei offers the example of a large centralized country, China, where national policy and localized, concrete, targeted measures successfully and substantially reduced poverty. Raymond Offenheiser offers a case study of Oxfam America’s Behind the Brands campaign, which took a new approach to food production and nutritional security by working with ten global food corporations to set up best policies and practices designed to change the way they do business.

In Part 3 (Chapters 17 and 18), we bring the book back full circle to the question of upending development to turn it right side up. In the final two chapters, we synthesize the contributors’ observations on the past aid industry and on present and future directions for development. We draw on all the prior chapters in discussing future roles for development practitioners, who are working in both donor and recipient agencies in the North and South, and to make specific recommendations for development studies programs in a changing world.

In Chapter 17, the editors look for lessons from the book’s many authors. How can development practitioners working within organizations make change within the constraints of the development industry, as described by contributors? How can we move toward development practice that honors participation, ownership, capacity building, agency, conservation of the environment, and social transformation? And how can practitioners negotiate the ethical dilemmas they inevitably face as idealism meets reality, both in the field and within their organizations?

In Chapter 18, we draw lessons from the earlier chapters and from our own experience as practitioners and as teachers of master’s-degree students in an international development program. We conclude by offering recommendations for designing development studies programs and preparing practitioners to negotiate the constraints of the development industry and contribute more effectively to sustainable poverty reduction, conservation of the environment and natural resources, and improved quality of life. We suggest that development professionals can transform development, turning it right side up, and that development studies programs can help equip them to do this.



## Cautionary Notes

This book has a number of limitations, and we would like to mention several. First, there is no good way to differentiate the “doers” and the “done-tos” without using loaded language that emerged from and reinforces some of the very perspectives this book seeks to upend. In our own chapters, we decided to use the terms North/Northern and South/Southern, as in Global North and Global South. By *North*, we mean industrialized countries that are generally on the “donor” side of the development-industry equation. By *South*, we mean economically disadvantaged nations (historically referred to as Third World, undeveloped, or developing countries) and spaces and communities negatively impacted by contemporary economic and political systems that tend to be on the “recipient” side of the development-industry equation. Some of the other contributors use different terms.

Second, there are gaps in the subjects discussed in this book. Because of space constraints, some critical aspects of sustainable development practice get short shrift. The private sector has always been an actor in development, particularly in terms of resource extraction and investment. Increasingly, however, the private sector is being asked to implement parts of aid agreements, perhaps in pursuit of greater efficiency or better value for money, or perhaps in a neocolonialist approach aimed at keeping resources and control of development in the hands of the rich and powerful, whether consciously or unconsciously so. We don’t know what impact these arrangements, often defined as public-private partnerships and called for in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, can have on building the local capacity necessary for sustainability or on distorting development objectives.

Nor do we focus on innovations, often in the private sector and business-minded NGOs, that Northern social entrepreneurs are pioneering in order to put assets, organizational resources, and leadership in the hands of the previously excluded. The Global Banking Alliance for Women, Root Capital, VisionSpring, Thousand Currents, and One Acre Fund are just a few examples of these innovative approaches. Labs for innovative development have sprung up—for example, the Global Development Lab, sponsored by the US Agency for International Development (USAID); MIT’s D-Lab; and the Northern-led but global partnership-based UNLEASH Lab—along with a myriad of highly competitive, generous global innovation awards for teams of young social entrepreneurs and inventors. New development approaches such as those of the Doing Development Differently (DDD) community and Harvard’s Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), while still coming from a Northern perspective, are seeking to question and change the development industry’s traditional paradigms. And a range of Northern development organizations from small NGOs (Give Directly and Action Against Hunger USA, to name two) to bi- and multilaterals (for example, USAID and the European Commission) are experimenting with building self-reliance and

expanding development outcomes through reforms such as *unconditional* cash transfers and multipurpose vouchers. We urge readers to research these and other organizations and programs. We are not assessing or endorsing any of these programs or organizations but are simply offering a few examples of currently recognized innovations in the development industry.

Likewise, gender is not the primary focus of any chapter. Development rhetoric calls for inclusion or the mainstreaming of gender analysis and gender rights into development plans and implementation; in practice, we know that this does not always happen. New actors in development are mentioned, but there is not space for an in-depth discussion of changing roles, approaches, and programs—such as the Chinese Silk Road initiative (One Belt One Road)—and what this means for developing countries and development practitioners. Although a concern for governance and its role in lasting development is evident in many chapters, none of the authors address governance separately as an issue essential to sustainability. We also pay scant attention to the role of economic growth and development. Equally, questions about the limits of economic growth and consumption, though critical to the twenty-first century, are given only passing attention.

In addition, insufficient attention is given to the role of Southern nationals working in Northern donor organizations and INGOs, whether within their home countries or elsewhere. National development practitioners working in international organizations can find themselves in a difficult position. They may have second-class status relative to international staff. Based on their status within their own culture, they may bring an elite perspective to their view of development or they may be well-grounded in the contexts of poverty, social exclusion, and environmental threats in their own country. But regardless of their experience and knowledge, they may be trained or pressured by their organizations to adopt Northern perspectives and adhere to Northern methods. And in many cases, there may be strong incentives not to rock the boat and to avoid risks.

We do not apologize for the many subjects we have been unable to examine. This book cannot be encyclopedic, and many of these gaps have been covered extensively in other books. Instead, we seek to raise questions and share knowledge about the nature of development practice and the way forward. We rely on the reflections, observations, and stories, emerging from the professional experiences of Southern and Northern practitioners, which readers can put to use more generally.

Third, we assume that our focus on Southern contributors will not deter Northern readers. Twelve of our nineteen contributors hail from the Global South and several of the Northern contributors, including one of the editors, have worked in their practice almost exclusively for Southern-based recipient organizations. The imbalance in this book is intentional. As teachers and longtime practitioners, we are acutely aware of the overt and hidden privi-

lege, power, and entitlement that come from being a product of the wealthy North, advantages that can overpower or silence voices, knowledge, methods, practices, and initiatives from the South. We hope that our Northern readers, especially students, can use their reading here to step back, listen, appreciate, and value the perspectives of their Southern colleagues.

Fourth, contributions to this book overlap in many ways but also do not always agree with each other. As development practitioners, we all see reality through our own lenses, and the mixing of perspectives can provide a healthy challenge to unexamined assumptions. Along these lines, as editors we suspect that some of our contributors, especially those working most actively in the field today, have felt it wise to moderate their critiques of the development industry, not so much out of deference as from a recognition of the power held by donor countries and their agents. Careful reading suggests where these donor impediments to sustainable development lie.

Finally, we are not so naive as to think that a revolution will upend the development industry. We recognize that much aid serves political and economic objectives of donor countries. That is unlikely to change anytime soon. But we argue in this book that we must be concerned with the development enterprise's obsession with quantification, measurable results, top-down technical fixes, and dependence upon Northern expertise, qualifications, worldview, and decision making. Within both industrialized and developing countries, myriad obstacles (corruption, environmental challenges, social exclusion, oppression, economic inequity, and other afflictions) to right-side-up development persist. Also, economic theories that vary from neoliberalism to market fundamentalism to dependency theory remain alive and well in some quarters. The problem with theories is that their complexity and lack of grounding in reality can make them difficult to implement in real life, even if germane and appropriate. The same may hold true with the demand for unreasonable quantification in the search for necessary accountability.

We hope to generate dialogue among development practitioners, the development industry, foundations, and private philanthropists about the definition and objectives of development, about who controls and benefits from development, and about accountability by whom and for whom. Where development is not primarily politically or economically motivated (and perhaps even where it is), we hope to expand the opportunities and means for practitioners to advance the local control, capacity, and participation that enable sustainability. And most important, we hope to foster an environment in which local practitioners and the people they serve can take the lead in defining and implementing their own development, benefiting from, but not driven by, the knowledge and experience of others.