

Tyranny of procedure

Judging from *The Broker's* first two Stories from Aidland, the world of development aid is rife with distress for its frontline practitioners. Both contributors to the Aidland series – Nancy Okail (in this issue) and Amy Pollard (in issue 19) – highlight anger, anxiety and tearful encounters in their tales.

Working to eradicate poverty or redress stark global inequalities might understandably involve moments of intense emotion. But the adversities of Aidland recounted in these reports do not involve confrontations with destitution, abuse or injustice. Rather, the tears are provoked by tensions among co-workers in development agencies. Both stories summarize insights gained over the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork and portray Aidland workplaces staffed with highly qualified professionals for whom the everyday job of doing development appears – paradoxically – confusing, frustrating, even nightmarish.

Assuming that these are not outlier accounts of highly atypical situations, it seems worth asking how the everyday work of development can be so traumatic. Since this comment deals specifically with Nancy Okail's contribution, let us focus on her time at the Ministry of International Cooperation (MIC) in a North African country.

The sources of duress for MIC workers are fairly obvious. The staff have been given an assignment by the formidable Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of such scope and urgency that its successful completion appears virtually impossible. What's more, the purpose of the task itself is hard to glean (even for senior management), and there is much anxiety as to whether the staff have the skills and knowledge to carry it out in time. Even this sparse outline contains the basic elements of a disaster-in-the-making: MIC staff are required to solve a problem of someone else's making which they don't understand, while the available means (time, skills) are incommensurable with the expected ends. Could this simply be bad luck, or is there a general pattern at work?

I suspect the latter is true. Development anthropologists like Raymond Apthorpe, Rosalind Eyben and David Mosse, among others, have argued that the aid industry is predicated on basic contradictions: development workers are *routinely* required to solve problems that are not known to be solvable, and they are obliged to do so with means that have no relationship to the desired ends. As a result, development policies become self-referential. That is to say that the ultimate purpose of policy declarations is not to achieve specific substantive outcomes (poverty alleviation, citizen empowerment, recipient ownership), but to provide justification for perpetuating the work of development itself.

Such an analysis suggests that there is something in the very tools of aid-related thinking – the basic premises, concepts and institutional values – that obscures the disjuncture of means and ends. The cognitive underpinnings of the development

industry have drawn a harsh critique for decades. From its post-World War II beginnings, 'development' has been faulted as a thinly veiled and hypocritical apology for perpetuating imperial domination. What the more recent, ethnographically grounded critiques of donor thinking suggest, however, is something else — less conspiratorial but also more nefarious. Scrutinizing the managerial practices and procedures of aid agencies exposes a semantic realm in which nothing means quite what it claims to mean.

The 'results' of results-based management do not refer to the lofty aims of poverty reduction, partnership and empowerment, but to kilometres of road, or to closing the deal on a loan agreement. Could it be that the structure of incentives (rewards and sanctions) with which the development industry guides employees along their career paths encourages Aidlanders to filter out this semantic dissonance and bracket the formative contradictions of their jobs? Be that as it may, the mechanisms of denial seem to break down from time to time: witness the tears and anger so central to these stories.

Having taught university-level development studies for decades, I know for a fact that most students enter the field in the hope of making a substantive contribution to improving human welfare. Over the course of their studies, awareness grows that development is not a simple technical task. Most graduates seeking jobs in Aidland understand that some policies will be misconceived, and that even the best-made plans can be waylaid by political interference or bureaucratic obstacles. But few, if any, are prepared to confront the dystopia we can glimpse in both Pollard's and Okail's sketches, of a world in which noble outcomes are routinely perverted by the tyranny of procedure, in which adherence to form and appearance is a higher priority than substance and results.

Nancy Okail's rich auto-ethnography has allowed her to channel the frustrations of her Aidland co-workers through her own powers of reflection. It cannot have been a happy endeavour, and we must be grateful for her efforts. That said, I suspect that few Aidland employees can afford the 'luxury' of ethnographic reflexivity. Most must repress such frustrations in order to pursue their normal career goals. Nancy herself did so only to regret, in retrospect, how her participation in misconceived organizational processes lent them legitimacy. Certainly there is more to Aidland than this, as future stories in this series undoubtedly will demonstrate. Still, the picture we have been given thus far suggests that there is much in the work of development that needs fundamental rethinking. ■

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