

# **The Development Contact Zone**

## **Practitioner Perspectives on Culture, Power and Participation in Cambodia and the Philippines**

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the function of culture and power in Development praxis, as defined by Post-Development theory, the Participation approach to Development, and Development workers in Cambodia and the Philippines. Practitioner perspectives have been gathered by means of informal interviews conducted in Cambodia and the Philippines. The primary inquiry of this thesis is whether Development is culturally destructive, whether the current paradigm can deliver effective results, and what effect power relations have on these outcomes.

The research approaches Development as a contact zone, in which Southern Development workers function as border crossers, moving between the cultures of funders and local communities as they work to implement Development projects and programs. This affords practitioners privileged insight into the cultural negotiations of this contact, making their input critical to this inquiry. Their input is placed in the context of Post-Development theorists' assertion that Development is a culturally destructive discourse, and the proposal by other theorists that a participatory approach to Development adequately addresses Post-Development's key concerns. Participation addresses issues of power and context in Development practice from a different perspective from the Post-Development theorists, and outlines a series of strategies designed to overcome well-recognised limitations of Development practice.

Practitioner responses are grouped into three discussions, addressing their overall perspective on Development and Participation, their attitudes to cultural

change and Development's role within that, and their experience of power in Development funding relationships. Their responses were overwhelmingly supportive of participatory approaches to Development, and advocated a stronger role for the grassroots organisations that are pivotal to the Post-Development approach. Different attitudes to cultural change were expressed by practitioners in the two countries, however they consistently named Development as a source of positive cultural change, naming this as a key aim of their work. Finally, practitioners were critical of their relationships with funding organisations, which they felt were unduly controlled by the funders.

This research concludes that participatory Development fosters cultural liberty by reinforcing collaborative cultural traits and strengthening communities to make choices about culture. While Post-Development provides important critiques of Development, its proposed alternative of turning to the grassroots is not supported by practitioners, who seek ongoing relationships with Northern organisations and individuals. In particular, practitioners desire a model of funding relationship that reflects their own practice, by conforming to the *paradigm of people* that underpins the participatory approach to Development.

This thesis contributes to Development debates by presenting Southern perspectives that contrast with Post-Development, and by proposing a framework that can underpin further development of funding partnerships. Furthermore, it demonstrates that practitioners believe that Development is a reinforcing factor at a time when cultures are exposed to increasingly diverse cultural influences.



I declare that this thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by another author except where due reference is made in the text.

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## Terms and Abbreviations

AusAID	The Australian Agency for International Development
<i>Barangay</i>	Village (Philippines)
<i>Bayanihan</i>	Cooperation (Philippines)
<i>Dah-leng</i>	Driving aimlessly (Cambodia)
GRO	Grassroots Organisation
Haçienda	Large landholding with tenant farmers (Philippines)
Haçiendero	Landlord on a haçienda
INGO	International NGO
IP	Indigenous People (Philippines)
LGU	Local Government Unit (Cambodia)
Localising	The process of transferring NGOs to the control of Cambodians (see page <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b> )
Lower	People with relatively low power (see page <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b> )
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
Paradigm of people	Framework for the participatory approach to Development, explained on page 7. Also referred to as the participatory paradigm
PO	People's Organisation
Salvaging	Experience described by Filipino respondents, in which men are taken away by the military and either found murdered or never seen again
Upper	People with relatively high power (see page <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b> )

VDC

Village Development Council (Cambodia)

## **Introduction**

The 2004 *Human Development Report* published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) focuses on *cultural liberty*, which it calls ‘vital’ to human development on the basis that ‘being able to choose one’s identity – who one is – without losing the respect of others or being excluded from other choices is important in leading a full life’ (UNDP 2004, p. 1).

Demands for cultural freedom are being heard from many regions, and the globalisation of communications is making these calls more audible and their repression more difficult (UNDP 2004, p. 27). In this context Development has been accused of being a repressive system forcing the homogenisation of Southern cultures in accordance with a Western model. This argument is particularly prominent amongst the group of theorists known as the Post-Development school, who propose that Development as we know it should be discarded in favour of the actions of grassroots movements independent of external influence. Participation theorists, on the other hand, propose that adjusting the focus of Development can make it more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the poor, on the understanding that if people are able ‘to participate in, and to shape, decisions affecting them’ (Eade & Williams 1995, p. 15), they will create outcomes that are more appropriate than if outsiders had controlled this process. I draw from this the implication that local people will shape Development in a culturally appropriate manner – in other words, it is expected that participatory Development will be more relevant and effective than non-participatory forms. Both approaches therefore respond to issues of

cultural liberty, but take very different perspectives on Development's role in achieving it.

Development refers to a range of praxis covering a broad spectrum of goals and values, as well as embodying many assumptions about what is desirable. Pieterse suggests that 'we can probably define development as the organised intervention in collective affairs according to a standard of improvement,' noting that even this allows for a broad scope of interpretation (Pieterse 2001, p. 3). Hart extends this by proposing a distinction

between "big D" Development defined as a post-second world war project of intervention in the "third world" that emerged in the context of decolonisation and the cold war, and "little d" development or the development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of historical processes (Hart 2001, p. 650).

On this basis, this thesis is concerned with "big D Development," the deliberate intervention by "developed countries" into the affairs of "developing countries," with the aim of improvement. 'Development' will therefore be capitalised throughout the thesis whenever it refers to 'big D' Development.

The proposal that I test in this thesis is that when Development is participatory, it does not have the destructive effect on culture proposed by Post-Development, but is transformed through its engagement with people and context. I explore this problem by comparing these two bodies of theory (Post-Development and participatory Development) with the perspective of people actively engaged in implementing Development on a day-to-day basis. The research begins by acknowledging that Post-Development offers important

insights in relation to Development, notably in the emphasis placed on power in their analysis of Development. Brigg's analysis of Post-Development is more generous than some others, in that while others seize on the theory's shortcomings, Briggs notes that no single group can be 'expected to offer both sophisticated critical insights and to solve the problems of world poverty' (Brigg 2002, p. 421). Recognising this, the aim of this thesis is to build on the critical insights of *both* Post-Development and Participation<sup>1</sup>, and use them to explore ways forward in the Development arena. One of the strengths that Post-Development theorists call upon is their connection with the grassroots, which also functions as a certain moral high ground because as long as Post-Development theorists can claim special and exclusive access to grassroots perspectives, they can dismiss criticism as being out of touch with "real needs". Understanding the extent to which this claim is valid will add a further dimension to critical engagement with Development theory and practice since it may enable critics to engage more effectively without fear of being labelled as imperialist.

This thesis therefore engages with Post-Development's claim to represent Southern views of Development and its effect on culture. In doing so, this research attempts to follow means consistent with Post-Development thinking, in the sense of going to the grassroots to test the theories of Post-Development and seek locally produced answers to Development problems. Since it is not possible to find a single Southern "voice", this research seeks a particular perspective, namely that of Development workers with community

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, I have capitalised Participation throughout this thesis where it describes a particular approach to Development.

development-focused NGOs and People's Organisations (POs) in Cambodia and the Philippines. Although these workers have a clear investment in Development, they also occupy a unique position that affords them close contact with the grassroots *and* implementing and funding bodies, giving them very practical experience of the complexities of Development. This research is specifically concerned with people working with NGOs as opposed to bilateral organisations or other donors, due to NGOs' reputation for being closer to the grass-roots (see Hudock 1999).

In this way, this thesis considers the Post-Development critique of Development, and asks whether another model (specifically Participation) might be a better response to the question of cultural liberty in Development. I argue that Post-Development theorists too readily dismiss Participation as a means of securing improved outcomes for Southern people and their cultures, but I also acknowledge that a range of participatory approaches exists, not all of which adequately respond to Post-Development concerns. This argument is tested by interviewing Development workers in Cambodia and the Philippines to discover their perception of Development's cultural impact, and whether their favoured strategies align more closely with Post-Development or with Participation.

### ***Post-Development***

There has been extensive criticism of Development for several decades, based to a large extent on the equation of Development with Westernisation, and the way Development has "Otherised" and disempowered the poor. According to



Watts, Development thinking has reached a crisis or gridlock, with many critiques made, but few viable alternatives proposed (Watts 1995, p. 46; see also Schuurman 1993). Post-Development theory emerged in this context, and through a discourse analysis approach concludes that Development is a Western imposition that affords neither agency nor benefit to the poorer countries of the South – and which in fact *creates* the Third World by means of a ‘new political economy of truth’ (Escobar 1995b, pp. 212, 213). A central concern for this group of theorists is ‘that development [has become] a force so destructive to Southern cultures, ironically in the name of people’s interests’ (Escobar 1995a, p. 44). This destruction is one aspect of the “violence” that Escobar and his colleagues believe is the main outcome of Development for the people of the South. Post-Development theorists hold that Development is deeply homogenising, and views all countries as being located at different points on a universal trajectory to a predetermined end, ‘moving along one single track toward some state of maturity, exemplified by the nations “running in front”’ (Sachs 1992, p. 3). This leads the Post-Development theorists to a profound concern for the preservation of diverse ways of being that they believe are devalued or destroyed by Development.

Out of their analysis, Post-Development theorists draw the conclusion that Development should be abandoned and that grassroots groups should be looked to as a source of a ‘more radical imagining of alternative futures’ (Escobar 1995b, p. 213). This proposition is based on an assessment that Development processes are violent towards the marginalised, and an assumption that the actions of grassroots movements will always be less violent since they are grounded in the desires and actions of the people themselves. While much of

Post-Development's criticism was shared by other critics, this radical rejectionism is a critical point of difference. This thesis is primarily concerned with Post-Development claims about culture and power in Development, specifically addressing the question of whether Post-Development accurately represents the views of the South on culture and Development, and in light of this enquiry seeks to discern a strategy that effectively addresses the desires and needs of people in the South, as understood by Development workers in Cambodia and the Philippines.

A final distinguishing feature of Post-Development is the implied 'politically correct position' (Pieterse 2001, p. 366), achieved in large part by the claim to present the views of the 'social majorities' (see Esteva & Prakash 1998, p. 12). Post-Development claims to be a Southern theory, on the basis that the origins of many of its progenitors lie in countries which are part of the South, and they have had extensive and close dealings with the poor of Southern nations. The Post-Development theorists claim that their position is grounded in rejection of Development by Southern people, who 'see their resistance as a creative reconstitution of the basic forms of social interaction, in order to liberate themselves from their economic chains' (Esteva 1992, p. 20). It is important to reflect, however, that Post-Development theorists speak from a very different space from that of the people on whose behalf they speak, since many live and work in First World countries (or have done so), and all are able to engage critically with Development theories and debates. This distinguishes them quite markedly from Development's "target group", most of whom have had very little access to education and even less ability to travel internationally

or to engage in written academic debates taking place in English, often in expensive and specialised books or journals.

### ***Participation***

Long before the Post-Development concerns gained prominence, Participation held an important place in Development debates (Dudley 1993, p. 159). Like Post-Development, Participation gives particular attention to power in Development, especially as it relates to the marginalised and the influence they are able to have over changes in their own lives. A key difference is that Participation builds on Development rather than wholly rejecting it in the way Post-Development does, advocating instead a shift of focus from ‘things’ to people (Chambers 1995a). Participation therefore functions *within* the broader Development framework, but seeks to change it dramatically by flattening existing hierarchies and turning the focus back on the actions of the powerful - that is to say, making development not just about poor people and ‘their’ problems, but also about the rich and powerful and the impact of their actions (Chambers 1995b, p. 6). In practice, the “paradigm of people” is achieved by encouraging the involvement of poor people in the Development processes targeted at them, not only as cheap labour in the implementation stages, but at all points of the project cycle, from needs identification through to evaluation (Turner & Hulme 1997, pp. 141-142). Participation recognises that the power of people in the North – Development professionals in particular – has a direct effect on the ability of people in the South to meet their needs, however Participation’s proponents suggest that it is possible to overcome this, and for Northern workers ‘to be sensitive, to decentralise, and to empower, enabling

poor people to conduct their own analysis and express their own multiple priorities' (Chambers 1995b, p. 22). Although Post-Development theorists do not feel that Participation goes far enough, Participation has been widely adopted within mainstream Development practice, including major national aid and Development bodies such as the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), which requires Australian NGOs to incorporate Participation as a key Development strategy (see AusAID 2004c).

### ***This Research***

This thesis is also concerned with power and culture in Development as it is experienced in the transformative space in which "local" people engage with Development. Specifically, it enquires into the ways in which Development power structures affect Development workers and their ability to do their work, as well as seeking the perspective of those workers on the impact of Development on local cultures. It also explores Development worker perspectives on the effectiveness of Participation as a response to these central concerns of power and culture. Unlike Post-Development, Participation seeks to respond to these issues within the fundamental framework of Development, but on the basis of considerable critique of that framework. By exploring the efficacy of Participation with Development practitioners, it is possible to deepen these Development discussions.

Participation and Post-Development do not need to be viewed as a binary pair, in the sense that they represent the exact opposite of each other, or that one must choose between the approaches (although some Post-Development

proponents<sup>2</sup> appear to set up a Development - Post-Development binary which includes Participation in the former category). Both of these approaches have positive contributions to make to Development theory and practice and each can benefit from the insights of the other. This research considers the two approaches because they have both achieved prominence in Development and both attempt to respond to Development's shortcomings. I do not ask practitioners to choose between the two approaches, but rather to contribute to the debate by giving their perspectives on the positives and negatives of each.

NGO Development workers are to some extent mediators of the Development process, and they have insight into both the community in which the project takes place and the organisation in which it (or its funding) originates. Further to this, often they are themselves part of the grassroots who form the core of the Post-Development model, the people to whom Development is encouraged to turn for inspiration and guidance. Although Development practitioners may be viewed as part of the Development machine, I do not regard them as "corrupted" by this, but rather in a privileged position of insight into two worlds, and perhaps two worldviews. In this sense, they provide a much wider perspective than could be found amongst "ordinary" community members. Added to this, they are likely to be more confident to engage with a foreigner conducting research, on the basis of their contact with other foreigners and with imported ideas.

In performing this research, I had several hypotheses, grounded in the Post-Development critique of Development. The first was that there would be a

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<sup>2</sup> Such as Esteva and Prakash (1997, 1998), Escobar (1992, 1995) and Rahnema (1992, 1997).

high level of consistency in the responses, which include practitioners from two nations (Cambodia and the Philippines). While anticipating important differences at the level of detail, I expected that it would be possible to extrapolate some broadly applicable principles on which to base an alternative Development strategy. The second hypothesis was that power and culture are important issues for Development practitioners. While this may be expressed in various ways, relating to specific issues and situations that affect the practitioner, it was anticipated that these would be important concerns which practitioners have considered to some degree as they have performed their work. The third hypothesis was that Post-Development's assessment that Development inflicts an unacceptable level of cultural damage would be consistent with the views of practitioners, but that they would not agree that Development should therefore be rejected in its entirety. My expectation was that practitioners would instead call for a greater equity regarding the control of Development, especially the input of those whom it most affects, and that this would be seen as an effective strategy for mitigating cultural damage.

### ***Thesis Organisation***

The thesis commences by discussing the context of this research, starting with the conceptualisation of Development as a contact zone, in which people engage across differences of culture, power and experience. This is followed by a consideration of the theoretical location of Development workers and the agency they exercise, in the context of a consideration of NGOs and Development workers. Development workers' unique position constitutes them as the link between the funder and/or implementer and the community,

locating them simultaneously at the bottom of the NGO hierarchy and as highly important in the eyes of the community. This is followed by a discussion of the ways that NGOs have evolved and how their structure and history enable them to develop a quite distinctive approach. This NGO niche provides a perspective that is relevant to this discussion since although NGOs are products of the Western institutional context, they work more closely with the grassroots than, for example, bilateral agencies are able to do. Historically, NGOs have been able to be more participatory in approach than government-related agencies, due in part to their philosophies and in part to their proximity to the people they work with. Chapter One concludes with a discussion of partnerships between funding and implementing organisations.

Chapters Two to Four address the theoretical context of this research. Chapter Two addresses Post-Development theory, exploring its discourse analysis approach to mainstream Development and the key criticisms it draws, with particular attention to the impact of Development on culture. This is followed by Post-Development's conclusions, namely the rejection of Development and the proposed turn to the grassroots, then a summary of the broader response to Post-Development theory. The third chapter discusses approaches to culture, in order to facilitate a clear assessment of the cultural assumptions on which Post-Development is grounded, and alternative positions. In particular it addresses modernist and cultural studies approaches, exploring the implications each approach would have for understanding Development. It also examines Hall's (1992) description of three key interpretations of the effects of cultural change, namely homogenisation, heterogenisation and hybridity, and how these interpretations colour people's attitudes to cultural change. This leads into

Chapter Four, which concerns Participation as another response to Development critique, opening with a consideration of the variety of interpretations of Participation, and in particular the paradigmatic approach to participatory Development. This is followed by a discussion of the way unequal power is dealt with in this approach, and the ways culture is understood and dealt with. Finally, the practical application of participatory Development is discussed, in light of the breadth of participatory approaches and the heavily critiqued distance between theory and practice within this approach.

Chapter Five commences the second half of this thesis, which focuses on the field work results, providing a third perspective alongside Post-Development and Participation. This chapter describes the research approach and the distinctive problems anticipated. A case study approach has been selected as the most appropriate way to explore the questions posed in this research, and the case studies focus on Development workers in Cambodia and the Philippines. The rationale for this approach is outlined, with a discussion of the benefits and limitations of the study.

Chapter Six considers Development workers' understanding of Development and whether they share Post-Development's assessment of Development. This is followed by an exploration of the extent to which they support participatory Development approaches, and the methods they use. Chapter Seven discusses the attitude that these Development workers have towards cultural change, and where they see the strongest cultural influences stemming from. Development workers' underlying approaches to culture are explored, together with the



implications of this for their approach to Development. Chapter Eight offers a discussion of Development workers' perceptions of their funders'<sup>3</sup> approach to Development and the extent to which this is consistent with their own approaches. Relationships between these NGOs and their funding agencies are explored in the context of their impact on the Development practice that results. Chapter Nine summarises the work and highlights the most significant outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to use the term funders, rather than the more usual 'donors', since the latter term may obscure the conditions that these bodies tend to put on the funds they grant, rather than donating them unconditionally, as may be implied in that term. 'Funders' more closely reflects the economic and contractual nature of the relationship.

