

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**How Development Projects Persist: Everyday Negotiations with Guatemalan NGOs.** By Erin Beck. Duke University Press, 2017, 266 pp., £20.99.

The book confronts fundamental issues mostly ignored in development literature and discourses on how projects constitute what determines what happens on the ground. The author, Dr Erin Beck, is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon. Using the case study of Guatemala, she dissects key interacting factors such as international trends, local histories and contexts, development experiences alongside interacting actors including development workers and project beneficiaries, within development interventions. Beck's argument suggests that these interactions set the conditions of the persistence of development projects. Her argument is drawn from examining and comparing two NGOs, namely *Namaste* and *Fraternity*, which use two contrasting approaches to development with microfinance projects targeting indigenous women, who often appear to have different goals from those pursued by the NGOs.

In the book, the author observes these two contrasting approaches to community development that are commonly used by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and how they respond to the question of which type of NGO and which development model works better. One approach relies on locally sourced means and the other on foreign-funded NGOs. Interventions through foreign-funded NGOs use bureaucratic structures with measurable results, whereas self-reliant interventions adopt a multifaceted approach through their own means in pursuit of goals that cannot be quantified. Within these two approaches, Beck identifies the relationship between empowering indigenous women through economic well-being and lifting impoverished communities out of poverty. Beck notes that women are assumed to be more responsible than men for channelling programme benefits to their families.

The book moves away from a binary assessment of failures or successes of models used to achieve development goals in communities where projects are implemented. Instead, the book supports the idea that projects and NGOs are dynamic as they are transformed by the context and lives of the communities with which they are working. The book emphasises that development models, as designed originally, face realities on the ground that can reshape them through different experiences embedded in the local context. Beck challenges the reader to explore the meanings, motivations and strategies of NGOs under the guise of development with a focus on interactions between international trends and local histories and contexts alongside the interactions between development workers and projects

beneficiaries. Her analysis reveals that development interventions are interactive processes shaped by these interactions. Thus, her suggestion that “when asking what development does for people, one has to ask as well what people do for development” (Beck 2017, p.4).

Beck’s empirically observable and verifiable proposition is that development projects represent social engineering from above and on the ground. At the same time, Beck considers that development projects show incoherencies that interrupt predictable paths between plans and practices, or input and outputs. They persist and generate many effects including unintended ones that impact local economies, institutions, and consequently people’s lives in multiple ways, some of which are not always positive. In this book, Beck demonstrates that viewing development projects as emerging interactions, encourages us to “abandon quests for the ‘best’ development model, to rethink our evaluation strategies, and to question our results rather than merely reforming our investments, all while simultaneously opening up new lines of inquiry (Beck 2017, p. 8).

In the comparative ethnographies of the two cases, namely Namaste and the Fraternity, Beck’s view is that international trends influence but do not determine development initiatives on the ground. Therefore, the Namaste’s framework is rooted instead in a faith in the market whereas the Fraternity’s organisational model is imbued with Mayan culture along with Christian values. Beck’s work is a great contribution to international development literature demonstrating that development persists even when it fails to develop communities and countries. Rather than focussing on the values of particular development practices, approaches, or organisations, the author underlines the importance development interactional environments, which carry on and can be generalised given that issues addressed in this book are not unique to Guatemala as other developing countries are likely in similar situations.

In this book, Beck has done a good job to enlighten the reproductive or repackaging logic of development projects which perpetuate development interventions not because they are effective but rather as the accidental result of various actors pursuing their own goals. Beck’s view is that project mentalities remain extremely strong and persistent, even in the era where projects in themselves are no longer the favourite tool of international development. While such knowledge appears essential in the book, Beck does not expand on how concrete development mentalities are associated to existing institutions in the community. Theoretically, these institutions, viewed as rules, norms and values, which may be bureaucratic, socially-embedded, or mixed set the context that shapes the environment within which projects take place (Cleaver 2012). Therefore, their consideration as

either part of the problem or part of the solution to community power structure concerns through the two Guatemalan women empowerment projects, could have strengthened the theoretical framework of this book. For instance, in this perspective of institutions, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) find it useless to implement development projects in contexts of non-inclusive institutions.

This book offers an anthropological insight on 'development' from its discourses to its outcomes. It identifies the reasons why 'development' projects persist even when they have failed to accomplish their stated goals and recognises their constant changes due to interactional effects on them linked to local realities of actors and contexts. This line of thinking agrees with a proposition by Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton (2009) that development projects take place in unpredictable and complex environments that involve a variety of elements that interact among themselves and with each other. Thus, readers of this book ought to understand the effect of interactions between donors, NGOs and local beneficiaries to 'development' and to what it does to communities. Such an understanding can lead to a shift in perceptions, policies, and practices of 'development' towards more recognition of these interactions between actors and contexts when the needs of the targeted projects' beneficiaries are addressed in developing countries.

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