

International Development: My Non-Woke Personal Library and Its Saving Virtues

By Geoffrey Clarfield

International Development—those who want to “Save the World”

By the time I was writing up my ethnographic material on the Rendille in the 1990s, I was based with my family in Nairobi. In the early nineties there was still some hope that a “white,” “male,” “middle class” man could hope for a life in academia. I soon began to doubt that, so I changed my research focus.



I had studied anthropology when it was still intellectually diverse, but Marxists, and then the radical feminists and post modernists began to have a disproportionate power over hiring young academics. Anyone like me who defended Western Civilization was suspect. So I concluded that teaching and publishing aimed at getting a tenure track academic position in North America would not work out for me in a field that was being taken over by affirmative action, based on identity

politics. So, I looked about me.

Nairobi is not only the capital of Kenya, but a regional trade and diplomatic center. Many international development organizations are based there, as are the embassies of scores of countries, each with their own development programs. So the conversations of most expatriates in Nairobi revolve around African and Kenyan "development." Few could and can define international development honestly, but this post WWII movement – which has shifted billions of dollars from the advanced West to the "developing world"– has its own institutional dynamic. This is based on a very watered down understanding that the goal of development is to somehow narrow the gap between underdeveloped countries and those of the OECD.

Every five years or so "experts" at the World Bank and the UN create broad new development goals which they expect all other "donor" nations to implement. In the fifties, it was "technology will solve all problems." This was followed by "community development," then "environmentally sound development," then "a focus on women," then "a focus on AIDS prevention and reproductive health." No doubt "Climate Change" is the latest new development mantra.

Most development projects do not work because they fail to take into account the cultural differences of the people whose lives they are supposed to improve. So a development anthropologist like me could always manage to find employment on projects where the donors have little idea of the cultural and social framework of the people they want to help. I provided them with that understanding.

So I became a researcher and administrator at the service of the donors and the people they wanted to help develop. By the 1990s anthropology had sufficiently fissioned into many subgroups. Development anthropology was one of them. So I retooled and made my living in that field and continue to do

so to this day.

How did this change my library and reading habits? Well, at first, I began to read books about "development economics" and about "management," a field of which I was only dimly aware. I started with Peter Drucker, the "father of modern management." As I considered his management practices and principles, I soon realized that every intervention by donors creates a new project.

As I read numerous other books on program and project management, I discovered that the language and jargon of international development changes every few years, because as each attempt fails, a new approach needs to be formulated. So to get hired I kept up with the jargon, which means reading a lot of programmatic statements from the UN and UN affiliated organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation, where I once worked.

I began to see the wide gap between the ideal and the reality of international development, which led me to books that argue for development from the ground up, in the Gandian sense. *Small is Beautiful*, by E.F. Schumacher and the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) movement were of help there. Then there are the very worthwhile writings of the "Appreciative Inquiry Movement" which explores methods for organizing small communities, based on community based shared visions and plans. This is done following quite different management principles. Conservatives would do well to study these as they could also be used as powerful tools in ground up development in the West.

Then I read two major exposes of international development, *Masters of Illusion: The World Bank and the Poverty of Nations*, by Catherine Caulfield; and *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, by William Russell Easterly.

Caulfield exposes the failure of the World Bank; Easterly argues that, when analyzed in terms of GDP, the amount of money that Western donors have spent in any one country has not and does not have any effect on that country's rising or falling GDP. This is indeed sobering, so while I continue to read about "development" or look at the projects that I have worked on, I now look back upon them as "temporary humanitarian interventions" worthy in and of themselves, but highly unlikely to be sustainable. Sustainability is, of course, a key concept that is central to development, but illusive and hard to define.

Part of the problem is that the world of development projects is unconsciously driven by various left leaning utopian ideologies. It is a grand form of social engineering comprising a cross cultural, transnational bureaucracy with varying sets of rules, spoken and unspoken. In anthropological terms it is a "culture" with its own set of values and social organization. And it is a world of "plans."

Indeed, the world of development spends millions each year on planning. Conservatives may criticize these plans as pie in the sky or even corrupt, but the left always triumphs, for Conservatives seem temperamentally unable to think globally and in terms of raising the standard of living of the common citizen in non-OECD countries. So there is an enormous opportunity for corruption and "rent collecting" by third world elites.

I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to work in this world. It gave me privileged access to political elites in developing countries, as well as diplomatic and government elites from and in the West. These men and women – our mostly unelected political and bureaucratic "leaders" – take billions of tax dollars from Western citizens' and often thoughtlessly and without any accountability send them off to developing countries. There is little to no auditing, little transparency and even less citizen consultation. I have witnessed this

close up. My experience and insider expertise in this field allows me to now read the news about the world of development and the development literature critically.

The entire system needs an overhaul. As one African colleague lamented to me, "It would seem that international development is now about poor people in the North giving money to rich people in the south." This troubles my sleep.

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