

# The nuances of development

A review of David Mosse's *Cultivating Development*

Development today is not a particularly nuanced affair. Its most visible protagonists are 'aid celebrities', such as musician Bono and economist Jeffrey Sachs, who believe that 'ending poverty' can be achieved through 'compassionate consumption' and 'back-to-the-sixties' bulk investments. This situation makes David Mosse's *Cultivating Development* a valuable contribution to the literature, and I highly recommend it to development professionals and academics alike. An outstanding ethnographic account of the Indo-British Rainfed Farming project – a flagship British aid initiative in India – does a splendid job of highlighting contemporary issues surrounding development by contextualizing and critically reflecting on dominant interpretations and practices.

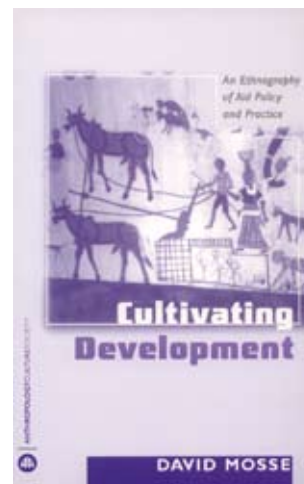
The book is centred on five main propositions. The first argues that development policy – mainly through development interventions and donors – 'primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support that is to legitimize rather than to orientate practice'. Phrased differently, development policy is an inherently upward-focused tool for maintaining the legitimacy of interventions rather than laying the groundwork for 'grassroots' or 'on-the-ground' implementations.

Mosse subsequently flips the relationship between policy and practice, and demonstrates the second proposition that 'development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas or systems of representations'. Proposition three is that those with ideas in fact are 'not driven by policy, but by the exigencies

of organizations and the need to maintain relationships'. Mosse argues that discourses become the end, rather than the means, of development because coherent and attractive development discussions create a far better framework for 'maintaining relationships' than contradictory development realities. Mosse's fourth proposition holds that projects 'do not fail' but 'are failed by wider networks of support and validation', which makes success and failure 'policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects' – proposition five.

This is not to say that development is relative and without impact. Mosse upholds the accepted idea that development projects are renowned for their unintended side effects, but adds that even if desired project effects are achieved, these are only positively acknowledged if they (still) fit into the dominant policy model. For example, Mosse's book shows in detail how the Indo-British Rainfed Farming project in its first phase (1992-1997) was considered 'absolutely cutting edge' and 'the jewel in the crown' of British aid, even though it had little to show for itself in reality. In the second phase, however, when some positive local dynamics were starting to appear, the project no longer fit the changed policy model and began to be regarded as a failure.

*Cultivating Development* has made a big impact in academic circles and beyond. This was partly triggered by the unusually strong objections to the book made by the subjects of Mosse's research, who were also his colleagues for over ten years in the farming project that is the focus of the book. Mosse used his comparative advantage as participant-insider in the project to develop a 'complex, long-term, multi-sited and initially unintentional' research narrative that captures and ethnographically dissects the inherent struggles and tensions in current



'participatory' development. Few in development dare to openly acknowledge these issues, but rather, as Mosse convincingly shows, try to conceal behind 'the veil of policy'.

This last point is exactly why Mosse's book is a must-read: it discusses the uncomfortable part of development that most practitioners know well, namely the feeling that they are continually fashioning discourses and policies that do not reflect the realities they face in projects and local settings. *Cultivating Development* explains why these 'uncomfortable feelings' arise and how they are perpetuated. Mosse has forcefully set the tone for a 'new ethnography of development' that does away with the 'monolithic notions' and naive views of development so characteristic of contemporary, celebrity-driven development, and instead seeks the nuances of development policy and practice. ■

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□ David Mosse (2005) *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Pluto Press.

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