Review-Essay

“Democratic Development” in Neoliberal Drag

Bradley R. Simpson

Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia
Patrick Barron, Rachel Diprose, and Michael Woolcock

Historians of development routinely mimic in analytical and narrative form the dysfunctions of the development processes and programs we purport to understand. Typically, one of our ilk will trace the origins and trajectory of Country or Institution A’s “development policies” toward Country B (and maybe Countries C and D) or will examine in closer detail the “impact” of one or more development programs. Our narrative focus almost inevitably derives from our archival sources, resulting in top-down accounts of development policies and programs written almost wholly from the perspective of state or institution officials, with assessments of impact, success, or failure reflecting their priorities, rather than the lived experiences of the ordinary people who are both the subject and object of development assistance. Moreover, because drama usually makes for better stories, we often choose policies or programs that contain the seeds of a narrative arc, large programs and projects such as population control, dam construction, or land reform whose success or failure can be more easily quantified in terms of falling fertility rates, megawatts produced, or acres redistributed.

In Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia, Patrick Barron, Rachel Diprose, Michael Woolcock, and a team of Indonesian researchers take a different approach. Using a sophisticated research methodology, they analyze the impact of the Kecamatan Development Program (KDP), an initiative initially funded by the World Bank and later wholly by the Indonesian government that was widely lauded within the development community as one of the largest and most successful interventions ever undertaken.

The KDP embodies a deceptively simple idea. The program encourages groups of villagers in participating communities throughout Indonesia to submit proposals for consideration at the village and subdistrict level, where they are vetted by their peers in a competitive bidding process. Program-appointed facilitators aid the process of developing, evaluating, and administering KDP proposals and grants, which are monitored by the recipient communities in “accountability meetings” to ensure that funds are being spent as intended. As the authors put it, the KDP was designed to be “a
democracy project disguised—or at least as well as—a development project,” which would help “cultivate long-suppressed civic skills and instill new precedents regarding resource allocation mechanisms” making local government more transparent and accountable (4).

On its own face, the KDP has achieved notable success, distributing nearly three billion dollars in grants and loans across tens of thousands of Indonesian villages to fund a huge range of small-scale local infrastructure and capital projects, with measurably greater transparency and less corruption than similar government- or Bank-funded initiatives (13). The projects funded are decidedly small-bore: roadbuilding, irrigation improvements, marketing assistance to small farmers, and the like. The authors, however, are not interested in merely measuring the success of KDP in macroeconomic terms but in determining the extent to which it contributes to greater accountability, transparency, civic engagement—especially by previously marginalized populations—and nonviolent conflict resolution. In order to do this they urge the rethinking of the very meaning of development itself, as a process that by its very nature destabilizes existing social and political relations by injecting resources that become the object and cause of competition and conflict (28–47). In one instance, competition between opposing political blocs in the poor village of Tengku Leda (in Nusa Tenggara Timur) spilled over into the functioning of KDP, when a newly elected village head appeared to manipulate KDP finances in order to steer jobs and resources to his supporters, triggering protests (112). Development, so defined, becomes a process of managing the conflict that it itself produces, by design, by malfunction, or through interaction with existing social tensions (18–19). Such conflict may or may not be violent; the questions the authors ask are, why do villages involved in KDP tend to experience less violence than those that do not; how does KDP contribute to such outcomes; and what are the implications of this for both development policy and the varieties of social theory that linger in the KDP’s design and assumptions?

To answer these questions, the authors of Contesting Development conducted research in forty-one “ordinary” villages spread across East Java and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock conducted sixty-eight separate case studies and detailed interviews with hundreds of KDP officials and participants while consulting a huge range of survey data collected by the Indonesian government, international institutions such as the World Bank, and contemporary media. The heart of the book analyzes the resulting data on the kinds of conflicts that KDP and other development projects produce; when (or if) they can help to reduce the incidence of violent conflict; the indirect effects of KDP on local conflict dynamics as well as local civic culture; and the broader social and political contexts within which the KDP must be evaluated.

Like all development projects, the KDP generates conflict. Key to its success, the authors argue, are the ways in which its design helps to channel and routinize conflict along pathways that reduce the likelihood of violent escalation. For starters, villages (and groups within them) compete openly against each other for access to a limited pool of resources, and proposals are evaluated not by government officials but by villagers themselves at the subdistrict level in a reasonably open and transparent process. Moreover, KDP provides paid facilitators to work with villages in preparing
grant proposals (facilitators do not hail from the villages in which they work) and
implementation teams to administer them. Finally, the program creates forums for
airing complaints about grant-making and administration. These built-in mecha-
nisms, the authors argue, not only generate greater transparency and accountability
(and therefore credibility) for the program among affected villagers but also encourage
participation from previously marginal groups such as women and the poor, who
develop a greater sense of ownership over the program as a result (83–90).

Ironically, the authors find that KDP had little direct impact on reducing
aggregate levels of violence in the villages in which it operates (165), in part because
villagers were unlikely to use KDP forums and facilitators to resolve nonprogram
conflicts. The authors do, however, suggest that KDP has an indirect effect on local
conflict dynamics “through changing social structures, forms of behavior, and norms
and behaviors in the localities where it works” (166). These effects derive less from the
micro-or macroeconomic impact of the projects themselves than from the kinds of
behavior and interactions the KDP induces among program participants. To give but
one example, KDP encourages the interaction of villagers from different social, reli-
gious, and cultural backgrounds in forums that would normally be dominated by
traditional elites but where, at least in theory, social status does not determine political
power. Groups normally marginalized at the local level, such as women—whose
participation is both required and incentivized through guaranteed access to a portion
of program funds—gain valuable political and social skills that thicken the civic
culture of participating villages. Moreover, though the program itself generates conflict
and interacts with a range of existing social tensions, over time KDP forums and
complaint procedures, the authors suggest, support broader dynamics of democrati-
zation at the village level by “stimulating demands from below” for greater
participation and accountability, and they increase the conflict management capacity
of village residents (180–88, 206–8). The positive or negative impact of KDP over
time, Contesting Development suggests, depends in part on the larger social context in
which it is embedded, and on the political and institutional capacity of participant
villages. But “whether KDP is working well is more important than the context in
determining the level and direction of impact” (242).

Much of the above analysis is insider baseball talk, primarily of interest to devel-
opment specialists or scholars of Indonesia. But the authors of Contesting Development
also provide an extended discussion of the role of social theory in loosening the
political and analytical stranglehold of economics on development theory and practice,
which derives from both the kind of quantifiable evidence that the discipline provides
and the desire of institutions such as the World Bank for “scalable” programs that
might be implemented in many countries by aid specialists lacking local knowledge
(253–55). The authors describe KDP as a project “designed largely on the basis of
social science theory and research” drawn from a range of disciplines (247–48),
including economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science, whose principles
are reflected in its design and function.

Incorporating these insights, they argue, not only makes for more effective
programs but should compel development specialists and institutions to recognize that

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some of the complex challenges they face—strengthening the rule of law, improving
democratic governance, and managing the conflicts that development produces—
simply are not amenable to economic analysis or solution. Some of these insights are
familiar to historians of development: that change is not linear but characterized by
punctuated equilibria; that rule systems vary according to time, place, and culture and
must be unpacked in order to understand how a particular program will interact with
them; that social relations matter (and that programs that ignore how they are consti-
tuted and maintained will likely fail); that building the capacity to engage from below
is as important as building technical capacity from above; and that the promotion of
“good governance” cannot be abstracted as a “toolkit” of technical-institutional fixes
but must be understood in the context of societies undergoing highly contingent
processes of social transformation. In the case of Indonesia in the late 1990s, this
meant forgoing attempts to work within highly unstable and corrupt institutions or
through still inexperienced civil society organizations and instead attempting to build
new mechanisms that could, if successful, both provide resources effectively and
increase the civic capacity of a country emerging from decades of authoritarian rule
(261–68).

The authors also gently suggest that many historians, while bemoaning their irrele-
vance to the world of policymaking, continue to write narratives that focus too much
on the withering critique and not enough on generating historical insights of a
constructive nature that might be incorporated into the design or function of actual
development initiatives. “If there is an absence of more regular input from the other
social sciences into development policies and projects,” they argue, “it is in part a
product of the reluctance of those disciplines to move beyond critique and more
clearly and compellingly articulate how, why and by whom things might have been
done better” (254–55). This is not a plea for the abandonment of critical engagement
or a brief for writing “policy-relevant” histories and adopting their system-supporting
logic, the authors insist. But engaged, prescriptive critique, even radical critique, based
on the kind of research embodied here is certainly possible.1

For all that the authors do, however, to help historians look beyond traditional
methods of both narrating and analyzing the effectiveness of development programs,
Contesting Development is remarkably weak in giving readers a sense of that narrative.
There is little to no analysis of the broad process—either in Indonesia, at the World
Bank, or in conjunction between the two—by which the KDP was adopted and
implemented, or the bureaucratic and political conflicts that may have shaped its
functioning at the national level. Given the still striking levels of institutional
corruption that exist in Indonesia, how did KDP manage to escape capture by elite
interests that have managed to distort other government-and foreign-funded programs
ostensibly aimed at improving the lives of Indonesia’s poor? Though the authors insist
on the relevance of anthropology, sociology, political science, and history to designing
and assessing the impact of KDP, there is little history here either of the process by
which social theory was incorporated into its design or of the ways the program
changed over time in response to the detailed feedback mechanisms that, according
to the authors, have made it a “learning organization” (268). To give but one example,
following Sukarno’s 1966 ouster, Western governments and multilateral institutions
also worked around highly unstable and corrupt institutions to construct new mechanisms for gathering statistical data on Indonesia’s economic performance and for engaging in development planning. Other historical parallels abound but are little noted here.

Moreover, Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock, for all their attention to the need for incorporating social theory and noneconomic metrics for analyzing the impact of development initiatives, remain wedded to the neoliberal assumptions of the post-Washington Consensus era at the World Bank that they purport to critique. Contesting Development strongly reflects the emphasis of New Institutional Economics scholarship on transparency, good governance, accountability, and participation as the goals of development. The development initiatives supported by KDP largely aim at making Indonesia’s agricultural economy, and those who labor within it, more efficient, not transforming its goals or basic mechanisms. The authors do not pose KDP as a basic challenge to the broader structures of political and economic inequality that constrain Indonesian society (nor do they suggest it ought to be), which may in part explain its appeal to local and national elites, who would fight it with all of the considerable resources at their disposal if it posed a genuine threat, but who are more than happy to sit around a table with poor villagers on occasion to plan local development projects and create the sort of ephemeral community that KDP envisions. This may also help to explain why, nearly fifteen years after the KDP began, income and wealth inequality in Indonesia continue to grow, and corruption to flourish, alongside the formal democratization of the country’s political system.²

The Kecamatan Development Program has produced few of the developmental artifacts that tend to intrigue historians—no big dams, hydroelectric projects, or sprawling terraces of “miracle rice” here. Its achievements appear banal, procedural, measurable in some ways that count for development experts but are really only observable in the micropolitics of everyday life in thousands of “ordinary” villages spread across the breadth of the Indonesian archipelago. Development, however, is like this. The singular achievement of this book is to demonstrate that some of the most important “impacts” of development projects such as KDP have very little to do with the traditional objects of our study. Acknowledging this insight should prompt historians and other social scientists not only to reconceptualize what we mean when we say “development” but also to rethink the methods we use to understand it. Doing so, however, should not blind us to the ongoing contests over social power that even “successful” development projects engage—or fail to engage—or to the underlying assumptions that animate them.

NOTES

¹ For an example, see Jonathan R. Pincus and Jeffrey A. Winters, eds., Reinventing the World Bank (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).
² See “Indonesia’s worsening inequality,” South China Morning Post, January 24, 2013.