

REVIEW ESSAY

The Purpose of Policy: Political Interests and Depoliticized Solutions in International Development

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

International development is an endeavor that encompasses a vast range of topics, involving experts from countless fields and various actors from governments, international organizations, industries, and academia. Astronomical sums of money have been spent on a great number of projects worldwide towards one common goal: to fight poverty. As noble as the intention may sound, international development projects and the actors that promote them are faced with great criticism, a large part of which points to their inability to deliver the results that they promise. David Mosse is one such scholar, and his book *Cultivating Development* investigates the driving forces of development projects and their policy prescriptions: the processes in which development projects are conceptualized, how they are implemented, and finally, how they are evaluated. This review will focus on Mosse's analysis of development projects and draw briefly from two other scholars in the field of "critical studies of development," James Ferguson and Tania Warren Li.

Cultivating Development is an ethnography of a rural development project in India in the 1990s called the *Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project* (IBRFP). The project was funded and led by the Department for International Development (DFID), the body in charge of international aid under the UK government. Expectations had been high for IBRFP, and although it did not have much to show in reality, it was praised as the "jewel in the crown" for being innovative and highly replicable (p. 183). When the project did yield actual results, however, enthusiasm for the project dwindled, and it was eventually regarded as a failure.

This is not surprising to Mosse, for he maintains a distinct understanding of “success” and “failures” of “policy,” or to be more specific, the nature and function of policy prescriptions drafted for development projects.

It will be useful to start by looking at where Mosse stands with regard to two stances on development projects and policies. Mosse explains that there exist two distinct and general ways of looking at development projects and the policies they implement in developing countries: an instrumental view that regards policy as a means for rationally solving problems, and a critical view that sees policy as a bureaucratic manoeuvre aimed at exercising power over people. Mosse evaluates the utilitarian view as too naive, and the critical view, which attributes the discrepancies between policy and practice to ‘the machine’ that depoliticizes matters by rendering them technical and providing technical solutions to sociopolitical problems, as ‘black-boxing’ too much. He states that both views are insufficient in capturing the relationship between policy and practice. Mosse thus provides a more in-depth conceptualization of “what policy is” in *Cultivating Development*. He does not view policy as a means or a measure designed to bring about changes, but rather as an end in itself. In other words, the objectives and goals of development agencies and their projects are the policies and policy models they prescribe, not the changes that the projects attest to bring about. In this breadth, Mosse sees policies as an aggregate of the interests of different actors.

The aim of policies, in Mosse’s opinion, is to articulate as many interests as possible, sometimes even those that in conflict with one another. By being able to articulate diverse interests, the policy is able to attract the attention and gain the support of different development actors, and thereby sustain itself. Development agencies are able to exert their influence so long as they are able to translate and tie together the interests of others to policy models, and the more complex the ties become, the more stable the policy is. Since interests are always subject to change, Mosse explains that policy is always shifting, always in the “future positive” orientation (p. 1). They need to constantly refocus and find political legitimacy, and regain currency in the international arena of “poverty eradication.” This is why we observe shifts in approaches to development and the rise of new terminologies each time. Katie Willis well summarizes these changes in trending terminologies in development in her book *Theories and Practices of Development*.¹ Tracing back to the 1950s, which is often referred to as the golden age of international development, Willis lists discourses and approaches that were dominant in the development arena in each decade. Topics range from modernization to gender equality to grassroots approaches and sustainability.

These few examples are evidence to the wide variety of discourses that were and still are prevalent in development policies and practices. In this sense, Mosse views policies not as measures for attaining results “on the ground” but more as tools for co-opting different and shifting interests. In addition, he argues that policies employ abstract and “ambiguous concepts such as ‘participation,’ which mediate

¹ Katie Willis, *Theories and Practices of Development* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2011)

or translate between divergent interests” in order to “achieve a high degree of convergence of disparate interests” (p. 46).

This fundamental need to represent and maintain coherence with different interests causes policy models to serve more as a self-legitimizing rhetoric rather than actual solutions for solving actual needs. In this light, projects are regarded as successful “not because they turn design into reality, but because they sustain policy models offering a significant interpretation of events... Failure is not a failure to implement the plan, but a *failure of interpretation*” (p. 181). In other words, even if a project failed to secure, for example, women’s rights in a traditionally paternalistic society as it had initially proposed, it is a success so long as the issue of gender inequality remains to be a policy issue amongst the actors. To Mosse, “the disjuncture between policy and practice is not, therefore, an unfortunate gap to be bridged between intention and action; it is a necessity, actively maintained and reproduced” (p. 231). With this understanding of policy, Mosse further argues that policies do not direct practice. Rather, it is practices that produce policies. Policy prescriptions are not a reflection of what needs to be addressed on the field, and their implementation do not bring about changes to practices. Rather, policies are a reflection of development practices—what development experts and consultants believe are legitimate and authoritative frameworks for interpretation.

This is quite a provocative argument, which may be the reason why Mosse’s book has been fervently criticized, and the publication of the book opposed by Mosse’s former colleagues at DFID on the grounds that it was “too negative and unbalanced,” “unfair and disrespectful,” and “damning of all our work.”² This kind of angered reaction is rather expected from development actors, especially in response to such a statement:

... consultants were valued, not for their ability to redefine practice, or to tinker with operational rules, but for their conceptual work, which helped managers rationalise and stabilise authorised representations of events; [the consultants’] ability to produce the models, metaphors or world views that could be ‘sold upwards as rationales for resource requests, and downwards as justifications for orders’... (p. 154)

James Ferguson and Tania Warren Li, to whom Mosse makes many references, have also expressed similar concerns regarding the implementation of development projects and the work of expert consultants who design these projects. James

² An anthropologist by training, Mosse was part of the DFID IBRFP as an expert on social development, and was greatly involved in the designing, implementing, and monitoring the project for many years in the 1990s. A short “behind story” of the book is available at <http://leftwrite.wordpress.com/2007/02/21/book-review-cultivating-development/> (last accessed, October 10, 2013).

Ferguson's book *The Anti-Politics Machine* was published in 1990 and is often referred to as a "landmark" for it was ground-breaking and it set the foundation for further research by other scholars of critical development studies.³ In his book, Ferguson describes a rural development project, labelled as a failure and abandoned by donor agencies, that was implemented in Lesotho in the 1980s. Ferguson attributes the failure of the project to the fundamental way in which the expert consultants think and approach a problem. He states that the donor agencies are equipped with a "development apparatus," which identifies issues under its own rationale of problematic. These issues are then expressed in a way that fits the discourse that they promote. In other words, a framework of problematic pre-exists the problem, and the solutions proposed to solve the problems are also part of the framework. Ferguson argues that the development problematic approaches problems and provides solutions in a way that eliminates the political. This "anti-politics machine" therefore functions to provide technical solutions to non-technical problems, for those are the only solutions that the donor agencies are comfortable with and the only way they are able to maintain their power. Similarly, in her latest book *The Will to Improve*, Li gives an anthropological account of another rural development project that was carried out in Indonesia in the early 2000s.⁴ The donor agency introduced what they named the "Social Development Project" with the awareness that social changes cannot be brought on by forcing technical solutions. Li explains how the project was designed and implemented by social scientists, yet still failed to reflect the reality and the needs of the people. She argues that social issues were still being approached in a technical way, and that expert consultants were "constitutively excluding" certain issues that did not fit with their agenda.⁵

Ferguson was very critical of the development apparatus and the anti-politics machine, and argued that its inability to ask the right questions or provide the right solutions bound it to failure. Li never doubted the intentions of development agencies in their efforts to bring about improvements, but she did point out that projects provided technical solutions to problems that were political or deeply social, and that the exclusion of such considerations was intentional. Mosse, as mentioned above, made many references to Ferguson and especially Li. However, he differed from these two scholars because he not only questioned the "machine" and the "conceptual apparatus" that the machine promotes, but also challenged the function of policy itself.

Mosse's book then begs the question of why, then, we bother with policies at all. If policies are not for modifying practices and bringing about positive change, but more for articulating and converging different political interests, does that mean policies are futile and deceitful? Going back to the dichotomy of instrumental and

³ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

⁴ Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵ Ibid., p. 269.

critical views on policy, Mosse maintains that neither view is sufficient to explain what policies are, how they are made, implemented, and affect the society. In the same breadth, Mosse does not deny the need for policies in international development. Towards the end of the introduction, Mosse makes five propositions about policy and development practices.⁶ These propositions are a summary of Mosse's insights and arguments, and he provides ethnographic accounts and first-hand experience as a long-term expert consultant in a rural development project as evidence of his arguments. Mosse's narrative, which is written in a way that could be enjoyed by a wide range of readers, provides a description of the different stages in which the agendas of a development project are selected, how they are implemented on the ground, and most importantly, which factors and actors influence these agendas. His message that policies must not be taken at face value and that more investigation into what policies are must take place presents great implications to policymakers and those studying policy in general, far beyond the field of critical studies of development.

⁶ Five propositions made by Mosse - Proposition 1: Policy primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support, that is to legitimize rather than to orient practice. Proposition 2: Development interventions are not driven by policy but the exigencies of organization and the need to maintain relationships. Proposition 3: Development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas (as systems of representations) as well as operational systems. Proposition 4: Projects do not fail; they are failed by wider networks of support and validation. Proposition 5: "Success" and "failure" are policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects.