

THE CORNER HOUSE

Missing the Point of Development Talk Reflections for Activists

Corner House Briefing 09

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Summary

“Third World development” seldom achieves its stated objectives and is repeatedly discovered to be based on false assumptions. Although discredited, however, it has survived and flourished. This briefing asks to what extent development’s critics have inadvertently increased both its longevity and its capacity to produce falsehoods and failure. Forging an effective critical activism requires reexamining the dynamic between development projects and their opponents, helpers and beneficiaries.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that "Third World development" seldom achieves its stated objectives and is repeatedly discovered to be based on false assumptions. The tall tales of foreign aid - fantasies about progress being made against global poverty, consistently wrong commodity price predictions, fictions describing the "successes" of failed technical assistance projects - are known and laughed at all over the world. [1\(#fn001\)](#)

What is less discussed is why, for 50 years, a project seemingly as thoroughly discredited as development has not only survived but flourished. Current development aid, as one writer dryly puts it, "probably dwarfs in scale many multinational industries or the Mafia". [2 \(#fn002\)](#)

In a stocktaking spirit, it may be worth asking to what extent development's critics have inadvertently increased both its longevity and its capacity to produce falsehoods and failure. Forging an effective critical activism for the future may require reexamining the dynamic between development projects and their opponents, helpers and beneficiaries.

[Two Roots of Falsehood \(#index-01-00-00-00ref\)](#)

"The fact that [the] myths are so easily and frequently dispelled compels me to ask why they have been nonetheless so persistent."

Michael Dove [3 \(#fn003\)](#)

Development's enduring propensity to generate obvious untruths is rooted in two basic facts. First, development by its nature forms an evolving structure extending across a range of physical environments, social fields, political contexts, cultural arenas, and institutional practices "from urban and cosmopolitan centres, where the primary ideas, projects and strategies are conceived, to the different regions and the implementation of actual projects in villages". [4 \(#fn004\)](#) Yet development's need to cross physical and social boundaries inherently complicates its efforts to predict, to manage, and to translate power and knowledge from one place to another.

This is evident even in the most narrowly technical interventions. For example, in some places in Latin America rammed earth walls are strengthened with poles. The background conditions necessary for this technology to work - including the fact that the earth used has to have a wide range of particle sizes - were not understood in advance of attempts to transfer the technology to places in which the soil consists of fine particles which cause the poles to amplify cracks and weaken walls. [5 \(#fn005\)](#) Similarly, even the most harmless-seeming cultural promotion projects can have unforeseen and deadly consequences. In the 1980s, a UN agency undertook an apparently benign project to restore an old South-East Asian temple. The chance of making money from a tourist facility associated with the project attracted elites to the area. They campaigned to remove villager families who had lived there for generations. Resisters were shot and their bodies dumped in the yards of other villagers as a lesson. [6 \(#fn006\)](#) More ambitious and more typical development interventions tend only to multiply unmonitorable, unmanageable or undesired effects, including, preeminently, popular resistance. Hence the familiar record of irrigation

projects which salinize farmland, [7 \(#fn007\)](#) conservation projects which promote destructive commercial logging, [8 \(#fn008\)](#) liberalization policies which increase the area under subsistence crops, [9 \(#fn009\)](#) and economic development policies which destroy livelihoods, increase poverty and ignite social strife. [10 \(#fn010\)](#)

Development's production of untruths is ensured, secondly, by the fact that development professionals can defend their class position and institutions only by denying the situatedness of power and knowledge which guarantees this unpredictability and uncontrollability. Whether "top-down" or "bottom-up", the image of development is one of social transformation through the exercise of expertise or power over a distance. Development officials admit, of course, that development occasionally produces unforeseen, uncorrectable and disastrous effects. But they cannot acknowledge the existence of a reality in principle unmanageable from an office or institution.

The ruling image is that of feedback loops operating in a physically and biologically uniform arena in which goals are fixed and agreed and the "relationship between different groups of participants in various social fields is relatively unproblematic". [11 \(#fn011\)](#) In the early 1990s, for example, development officials were fond of presenting to the public a metaphor of development institutions as supertankers. Cumbersome vessels these agencies might be, whose course at present was clearly wrong, yet they were, officials insisted, capable of responding in an incremental, linear fashion, albeit slowly, to the pressure of facts, criticism and demands for accountability from outside. Course corrections from instruments and sightings of landmarks would be met by a response from the wheelhouse, an evaluation of the effects of the course change, recorection, reevaluation, and so on, until the supertanker had swung around to the right heading. Today a more common metaphor is that of "aperture". Development institutions are said to provide openings now and again for outsiders to register corrections which "control the damage" the institutions do. Such metaphors make it easy for development officials to admit that development projects typically "fail", since they also imply that, with constant corrections, something closer to "success" may be ultimately possible.

[Producing Ignorance \(#index-02-00-00-00ref\)](#)

"As long as development aims to transform people's thinking,
the villager must be someone who does not understand."

Stacey Leigh Pigg [12 \(#fn012\)](#)

The need to preserve the "supertanker" image of manageability,

corrugibility, and in-principle accountability combines with recalcitrant intercultural realities to create tensions which influence everyone affected by development from government ministers to subsistence fisherpeople.

At the top of development politics, where pressures of grassroots particularities are most lightly felt, decisions are "designed above all to convince a broader public which knows nothing about the social situation destined to be transformed". [13 \(#fn013\)](#) Those to be developed can thus fairly easily be defined as a generalized Other to whatever development agencies claim to offer: as lacks to be filled or ignorances to be corrected. Yet the very wildness of the stories which result means that there is strong potential for rude shocks if reality irrupts into the fantasy. In attributing ignorance to others, moreover, development's higher-level protagonists ensure that they themselves remain ignorant of others' knowledge. This reinforces a further kind of ignorance: that of the local background conditions for their own knowledge. Should any development institution decide to invest heavily in pole-strengthened rammed earth wall technology, for instance, it would automatically have an incentive not only not to recognize how fine-particle soils can undermine the technology, but also not to recognize how soils with mixed particle size facilitate it.

For political and administrative convenience, development reports commonly present a picture of a generic, custom-bound peasantry locked in "traditional" poverty which can only be relieved through its polar opposite, "modernization" - a commodity which development agencies advertise themselves as being in a position to supply. For example, in the course of justifying their promotion of agricultural markets, World Bank officials and consultants have claimed that Lesotho is a "subsistence-oriented society virtually untouched by modern economic development" and that 85 per cent of its inhabitants make a living as farmers. In fact, as standard histories document, Lesotho has participated in regional labour, cattle and agricultural markets for more than a century and possesses a familiar type of administration, while its inhabitants derive the crucial part of their income as migrant labourers in South Africa, with only six per cent of average rural household income deriving from domestic crop production. A 1975 Food and Agriculture Organization/World Bank claim that 70 per cent of Lesotho's Gross National Product was contributed by sales of animal products was simply fabricated, the real figure falling between two and three per cent. [14 \(#fn014\)](#) In Egypt, by the same token, development institutions obscure the fact that land redistribution could provide every agricultural household in the country with the wherewithal to feed itself: such actions are not part of their work. Instead, an image is promoted of backward millions squeezed into a narrow Nile valley unable to support them without the mechanization development agencies can provide - despite evidence that tractor farms do not increase yields under Egyptian conditions of intensive land use. [15 \(#fn015\)](#) As Philip Quarles van Ufford

puts it, "images of the local scene must be made to fit organizational needs, and lead to an integrated discourse in which the capabilities of the administrative 'machine' and the definitions of development constitute a single whole". [16 \(#fn016\)](#) Unsurprisingly, development projects based on such falsehoods consistently fail to attain their stated objectives.

The fictions produced at or near the top of the development hierarchy need not be tied to any particular project. One example is the false version of Guinea's forest history propagated, without necessarily any intention to deceive, by policymakers, experts, local administrators and teachers. According to this history, the forests of Guinea's forest margin zone have been progressively degraded due to a breakdown of "traditional" community and authority attributable to immigration, population increase, commercialization, increasing mobility, and so on. Forest islands currently found around villages are interpreted as remnants of a once far more extensive forest cover destroyed by shifting cultivation and the fire practices of "savanna peoples". In fact, aerial photographs from the 1950s, oral histories, maps and descriptions from French soldiers between 1890 and 1910, and documentary sources from 1780 to 1860 all show that there has been no time in modern history when there was more forest than now in Guinea's forest margin zone, and in the 19th century probably much less. The forest islands were actually created by villagers, and encourage growth of secondary forest thicket in savanna, suggesting a positive correlation, in this instance, between population and forest cover. Current approaches to environment and development in the area, by failing to take account of these facts, are likely to be counterproductive in their calls for "external intervention in the organization of resource management to reestablish a lost social order". [17 \(#fn017\)](#)

[The Janus Face of the Development Worker \(#index-03-00-00-00ref\)](#)

"Sergeant Perron ... had decided quite early in his military service that for life to be supportable officers had to be protected from anything that might shatter their illusion that they knew what the men were thinking."

Paul Scott, A Division of the Spoils

Most participants in development find themselves located at the intersection between two different social groups, and alternately face in two directions. On the one hand, they must deal with pressures to fulfil the aims of projects or policies as interpreted by their immediate superiors. On the other they must acknowledge the realities of the environment they live in and manage their own survival amid the demands of peers and subordinates. [18 \(#fn018\)](#)

The two are typically incompatible. For example, as Stacey Leigh Pigg writes, every Nepali working in a development agency is likely to be able to "appreciate the difference between a Tibetan village in high-altitude Mustang and a Maithili village in a jute-growing area on the border with India"; yet in the social environment of development agencies, with their need for administrative and conceptual convenience and "generalizable models that can be applied throughout the country", this understanding "consistently dissolves in favour of a more convenient institutional lingua franca, the language of 'the village'. "As individuals ... positioned precisely at the points of blockage", development functionaries know that "what they know about real villages and real villagers" cannot be transmitted upward and communicated in the "language of generalities spoken in the world of development". [19 \(#fn019\)](#) Richard Norgaard reports a similar experience from Brazil:

"During my first year in the Amazon in 1978, I repeatedly heard complaints from lower-level bureaucrats in the field. The evolution of Amazon development through experience, or 'learning by doing', was not possible. Field administrators could neither alter the development plans themselves nor send adequate signals back to Brasilia as to why and how the plans should be modified ... information from the field that contradicted the plans was not believed. Thus mistakes, such as the provision of credit to colonists only for the planting of inappropriate strains of rice, were repeated until the colonists went broke." [20 \(#fn020\)](#)

To be sure, development officials and consultants are often called upon to provide evidence that projects are manageable, feasible and effective, and are really reaching the grassroots. Thus a demand makes itself felt for "counterparts", "consent", "collaboration" and "participation". Mid-level staff must launch pilot projects in "the village", find outreach workers who are "comfortable with target groups", and locate "advocates of local people". All this requires that they educate themselves, to a certain extent, about events outside their own offices. When they do, however, it quickly becomes evident that the package that development agencies are prepared to provide for the generic, developable "village" of administrative convenience is not what locals, especially the field staff's local allies, have in mind. To secure cooperation, mid-level development officials thus face pressures to reformulate or translate the project into terms which make it more workable in practice, or to use selected resources of the project to maintain their own position locally (in which case the project is often reduced to a "shopping list" confined to those items useful to local elites, or, in James Ferguson's terms, a "crumb thrown into an ant's nest" [21 \(#fn021\)](#)) or to subvert the project entirely. Gaining the collaboration of one local group, moreover, is likely to mean provoking the enmity of others. Little of this can be reported to higher-ups, since to do so would be to acknowledge publicly that officials have not been effective in implementing the project as

outlined.

Development officials can deal with these intractable tensions in many ways, but all of them involve the propagation of falsehoods. Insofar as development agency staff try to implement a project faithfully, they have to invite its targets to acquiesce in misrepresentations of their own lives, and if this leads to conflict, wall themselves off from the supposed "beneficiaries". Insofar as officials respond to the needs of local allies, the story of success they report to superiors will have to edit out details of the way the project has been truncated or twisted, or will have to be filed before the long-term effects of the project become clear. In Indonesia, a Dutch agency which had staked the future of a development programme on popular "participation" in an irrigation scheme simply suppressed a study it had commissioned which proved that the government-established "farmers' organizations" through which the project was implemented were resented by most villagers because they channelled project benefits to friends and relations of village heads. In place of this fact, the agency substituted an idealized image of a "traditional", more homogeneous village society. As Quarles van Ufford remarks, "the need to know what was going on locally and the need to remain ignorant of what was happening were inextricably connected". In the end the "project's survival depended upon maintaining - or creating - sufficient ignorance about what was happening locally." [22 \(#fn022\)](#)

Physical proximity to the subjects of development may change the nature of the pressures affecting development workers, but does nothing to diminish the underlying dilemma. Information collected directly from "the field", as Polly Hill notes, "is not a kind of pure substance with an inherent validity", but rather:

"matter which has commonly been extracted from unwilling informants by resorting to many convolutions, blandishments and deceits [and] fudged, cooked and manipulated by officials at higher levels, the main purpose being to ensure that the trends will be found satisfactory and convincing by those with still greater authority, as well as to compensate for presumed biases". [23 \(#fn023\)](#)

The enthusiastic field officer who prides him- or herself on being "in touch with the grassroots", heroically ranging over the countryside in four-wheel drives and joining in back-slapping drinking sessions with village heads, is a familiar figure in the annals of rural development worldwide. Yet the data this figure supplies, like those of others, are shaped by pulls of livelihood and class interest. The dilemma afflicts even development officials who share their subjects' rural background. In Pakistan, for example, foresters involved in a Planning and Development Project consistently made three claims: that small farmers opposed having trees on their farms; that it would be possible to persuade them only to plant large blocks of market-

oriented exotics, not small patches of multipurpose native trees; and that fuelwood could not reduce the burning of dung. Subsequent research showed that all of the claims were false. The reason foresters had made them, however, was not because they were out of touch with the grassroots: as many emphasized, they met with farmers often and were dehathi admi or rural people themselves. More relevant was the fact that the meetings were restricted to the rural elite, of which many foresters themselves were members, and the fact that the development apparatus, regardless of the personal experience of those who inhabited it, made the growing of unmarketed trees "invisible". [24 \(#fn024\)](#)

At the bottom end of the development hierarchy, rural villagers make their own myriad contributions to development's falsehoods. Some adapt its vocabulary in ways which enable them to gain new forms of status over neighbours they reconceptualize as "undeveloped"; others create their own "development myths" to protect themselves against the state. In Minankabau, for example, farmers suspected that a government move to have their rice land registered in the interests of "modernization" and economic progress would lead to more taxes, the need to pay off registration officials, and attempts to cheat people out of inheritance rights. To say so openly, however, would have been to risk being branded subversive. The farmers thus conjured up a romanticized, static and rigid version of customary adat law, loyalty to which, they told officials, prevented them from accepting land registration. It was this "folk law" which officials were thus encouraged to view as the "impediment to development". [25 \(#fn025\)](#)

[Critics as Development Participants \(#index-04-00-00-00ref\)](#)

The discourse of developers is often resistant to counter-evidence.

Mark Hobart [26 \(#fn026\)](#)

Exposing development's exuberant fictions and misleading images has over the years provided work for many critics and activists. Development institutions themselves, wisely, have not been entirely unaccommodating, often providing forums for critics to speak on condition that the institutions themselves are assured a role in setting things right. In recent years, the World Bank has published reports criticizing its own staff for failing to grasp local property rights, politics, resource use and economic behaviour, and for suppressing information which might lead to projects not being approved. [27 \(#fn027\)](#)

But it should be obvious that exposing such falsehoods does not necessarily do anything to change the social mechanisms which produce them, and

may even shore them up. The untruths generated by development are neither theoretical errors nor technical mistakes, but rather a structural feature of development at all levels. To suppose that unmasking them will lead toward their being corrected is to take up the same academic pretence of nonsituated power and knowledge that high-level development officials themselves are obliged to adopt.

Indeed, resistance to development's falsehoods can actually help development agencies evolve into more effective manufacturers of untruths. For example, the sustained popular opposition which forced the World Bank to back off from support of India's Sardar Sarovar project and Nepal's Arun III dam almost certainly contributed to the Bank's decision to demand new studies of environmental, social and economic impacts of another large-scale proposed project, Nam Theun 2 in Laos.

While the falsehoods duly propagated in the Nam Theun 2 studies were of the customary, easily-refutable sort - for example, that the 60 species of fish which villagers along the Theun river rely on for protein are "not expected to be seriously affected" after the project cuts flows to between one and nine per cent of their normal volume [28 \(#fn028\)](#) - they were laid on with an impressive lavishness. One of the consultants, the World Conservation Society, scenting the "resources" which the dam project could bring into the area for "management expertise", was even enticed into embracing the absurdity that Nam Theun 2, by flooding 450 square kilometres of forests and grasslands and opening up the area to further logging, was the only way to counter the area's "rapid decline of forests and wildlife". [29 \(#fn029\)](#) Although the process of generating these fantasies may have slowed down the progress of Nam Theun 2, in the end it helped provide new environmental and social justifications for the dam at a time when, due to the 1997 Asian economic crisis and uncertainty about Thai customers for its electricity, it had lost most of its economic *raison d'etre*.

[From Falsehood to Falsehood \(#index-05-00-00-00ref\)](#)

"For a century and a half, the prison had always been offered as its own remedy: the reactivation of the penitentiary techniques as the only means of overcoming their perpetual failure; the realization of the corrective project as the only method of overcoming the impossibility of implementing it ... the supposed failure [is] part of the functioning of the prison."

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Development's dynamism is rooted in its ability to use the falsehoods and "failures" it generates as raw material for further corrective actions claiming to apply power and knowledge at a distance. These actions then

inevitably produce new falsehoods and "failures", which, as soon as they come to light, are in turn operated upon, and so on ad infinitum. Far from being a problem for development, this unending process - however uneasy individual participants may sometimes feel about it - constitutes development's normal functioning.

This dialectic is already evident in project planning. The first impulse of development agency planners, on being told that a proposed agricultural project will be counterproductive because it will damage local soils and water through monocropping or salinization, will likely be to write an environmental component into the plan. When told that this environmental plan is unimplementable because it is bound to be subverted or ignored by local power-holders, the planners may respond by writing more enforcement into the plan. When asked where the enforcement will come from, planners may add a police academy to the plan; when asked how this academy is to be prevented from being used by a corrupt military, they will lay out schemes for "good governance"; and so on ad infinitum. At each stage, specialists in new fields are called in to create their own roles in the story of the global application of expertise.

Similar dialectics unfold once projects have been executed. An irrigation scheme on the Huay Mong tributary of the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand offers a mundane example.

In the late 1970s, the Huay Mong project was envisaged as an appendage to the grandiose proposed Pa Mong dam on the Mekong mainstream, from whose reservoir it was slated to draw irrigation water by gravity. When Pa Mong was shelved in 1979 - original proposals called for the resettlement of 250,000 people or more - planners consoled themselves by hurriedly redrawing Huay Mong as a stand-alone pumped irrigation and flood control scheme. An agreement securing partial funding was signed with the European Commission in 1981 and the completed project, fitted out with Belgian machines, launched in 1987 under Thailand's National Energy Administration.

At first, this "social experiment" - as it is described by officials responsible for the project - consisted of nothing more than basic engineering works. Insufficient arrangements had been made, for example, for getting irrigation water to farmers. A new project was added to adapt the landscape to what had already been built. Tertiary canals were dug to ensure that every field had easy access to water, and the Agricultural Land Reform Office was drawn in as lead agency. [30 \(#fn030\)](#)

Yet many local farmers objected to the canals crossing their land, and those local residents on the side of the river that enabled them to benefit from the project's engineering works were reluctant to join the associated "on-farm development" scheme. By 1993, European Union donors were demanding

that someone "create the need for the structure" - to quote the candid phrase of a Belgian consultant engineer who spoke to visitors in January 1998 about the project. Policy was rewritten and new agencies arrived to improve agricultural output and develop "local institutions" and "human resources". Tertiary canals were now to be constructed only when requested by farmers, and villager "self-reliance" and a "sense of belonging" were to be fostered.

Admittedly, these last phrases carried an Orwellian ring, given that the project had been imposed on the local area and that developing the financial and technical skills to manage it locally meant dependence on official schooling rather than local skills. But the real problem was that European donor pressure to retrofit the project to make it more "participatory" - by making water-user group committees democratically elected, increasing their role in maintaining the project's infrastructure, "empowering" farmers' organizations, inducing government field staff to concern themselves with "community development", and so forth - had ignited a further phase of resistance. This originated from the very Thai government bureaucracies running Huay Mong, who understandably dragged their feet in the face of the Europeans' criticism of their prerogatives, working methods and "top-down" approach.

To this, the European response was as absurd as it was inevitable: "reform Thai government agencies". In order to make sense out of concrete which had been poured at Huay Mong in the early and mid-1980s, it had become necessary by 1998 for the concerned European agencies to adopt a stance at once quixotic and openly imperialistic: that of remakers of the Thai state. The technician's dream of imposing effective irrigation and flood-control infrastructure on a Mekong tributary, instead of being checked and moderated by reality, had, when faced with failure, resistance and the consequences of falsehood, ultimately merely engendered other hubristic fantasies calling for the political reengineering of a larger society.

Policy reforms, too, lead to the proliferation of new fictions. For example, Northern activists have sometimes demanded that the World Bank abide by its reform pledges to "promote participation" in hopes that this will check its tendency to impose locally-inappropriate schemes on unwilling villagers. One of the Bank's responses has been to require of countries receiving loans that they conduct public hearings on plans for Bank-funded projects.

As Bank officials are well aware, these hearings are often reluctantly undertaken and officially supervised in a way which allows little discussion. The outcome is threefold. First, the activists' attention to the Bank's bogus "participation" initiatives legitimize them for donor-country audiences. Second, the activists' usefulness to grassroots movements is diminished when they are tarred with charges of imperialism which issue from officials

of the recipient country inconvenienced by the demand for hearings. Third, local officials can be conveniently blamed for obstructionism by the Bank when the hearings turn out to be spurious, confirming the Bank's claim that "we have the best of intentions but cannot be held responsible". A new, more extensive set of falsehoods about "participation" is born to replace the old.

The response of development to the promptings of truth-tellers, in short, has little in common with the linear process by which a supertanker's captain corrects course in response to repeated instrument readings and landmark sightings. If geometrical metaphors must be used, it more closely resembles the processes of iteration which produce the convoluted, unpredictable patterns of mathematical chaos. Simple critical inputs into development tend to result not in asymptotic convergence to truth and effectiveness, but rather in a political Mandelbrot set of endlessly detailed curlicues and blobs beyond which unfolds a further infinite perspective of crazily sawtoothed coastlines, islands and indefinitely receding spirals.

[Misunderstanding Development Talk \(#index-06-00-00-00ref\)](#)

"Apparently there is no limit, Joe remarked. Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed."

Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

If development's supposed "failures" are actually part of its success, then perhaps its falsehoods, too, are more than they seem. Perhaps merely to say that development talk is full of mistaken theories, unimplementable plans, fabricated histories, and untrue evaluations is to place it in the wrong genre. Instead of being viewed negatively - as oversights, lies, or ignorance - development talk might be more fruitfully and justly viewed positively, as a genre of achieved imaginative literature which is simply indifferent to truth.

Anthropologist James Ferguson remarks perceptively in this vein that the important thing to notice about the version of Lesotho's history and society presented by development institutions is not that it is false. It is that it is outlandish - outlandish, one might add, in a way which does not detract from its intelligence and craft, as a Shakespeare romance is outlandish. The ease with which the errors in development talk are refuted, their persistence and pervasiveness, and the fact that they are so little concealed, all suggest that truth and falsity are simply irrelevant to it. [31](#) ([#fn031](#)) Quarles van Ufford urges along similar lines that representations of "peasant life" in the imagination of developmentalist governments in South-East Asia are not meant to be "equivalent to scientific knowledge" [32](#) ([#fn032](#)) and so are hardly vulnerable to the charge that they are false. For

many economists advocating the placing of a monetary value on biodiversity, plausibility is also ultimately beside the point: as John O'Neill notes, "it is part of the policy-making ritual to come up with financial figures, even if one does not believe them since they are unbelievable". [33](#) ([#fn033](#))

If this is so, then to try to change the course of development by exposing the falsity of its theories or assessments is a little like jumping up on stage during an amateur performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to point out to the audience in outraged tones that the island of the play never existed and that Prospero is really just an insurance salesman from Basingstoke dressed up in a wizard suit. In the social circumstances in which it is produced, development talk is not judged according to the standards of historical, sociological or scientific truth, but according to how attractively it advances the plot. This is why grassroots activists' irony so often fails when they lobby development institutions, causing them to turn away in frustration at themselves as much as at the officials to whom they talk. A riverbank villager who tries to satirize an impact assessment for a project like Nam Theun 2 at a forum in Washington is putting herself in the spoilsport position of Plato, who wanted to banish the playwrights because they didn't tell the truth.

By the same token, to expect development agencies to learn from the experience of the social and environmental disasters associated with their previous projects is a little like asking the actor who plays Oedipus why he never seems to catch on to the fact that the old man he meets at the crossroads in every performance is actually his father, and therefore just goes on stabbing him night after night. Viewing development talk in this way makes more understandable the seemingly sincere impatience development project managers display when informed of the disastrous consequences of past schemes of the type they are pursuing. From their point of view, of what possible relevance could the actual past be to future actions which they construe as part of a bureaucratic drama? Just as it is impossible to stop Hamlet from moping around on stage by telling the actor who portrays him to get a life, so it is difficult to stop development agencies from emoting about the "successes" of their previous projects merely by proving that they were failures. If the biographies of playwrights and actors are any guide, the capacity of the authors and heroes of the development drama to turn truth into fantasy is hardly likely to be restrained just by giving them more truth and more life to work on.

[Reflections for Activists](#) ([#index-07-00-00-00ref](#))

"It does not suffice to confront the policymakers' "wrong" images of the local scene with "true" scientific observations."

Philip Quarles van Ufford [34 \(#fn034\)](#)

On this view, the intellectual aspect to the struggle against damaging development projects is not about whether what the experts say is true or false. More fundamentally, the struggle is about - so to speak - which genre of performance will prevail. Will it be one in which the distinction between truth and falsity matters, or one in which it does not? A strategic awareness of the way the play of class and institutional interests helps give shape to any particular body of knowledge and ignorance suggests that it is the social context of truth-telling, rather than truth-telling itself, which is the key element in the intellectual battle against destructive projects.

Looking at activism in this way opens up new resources of power and influence for campaigners, and points toward contexts of truth-telling which are less likely to contribute merely to the production of more falsehoods and to defeats for popular movements. It encourages ways of facing up to, and creatively contending with, a number of political realities:

- Development can translate everything, including acts of opposition and their consequences, into its own terms, if not necessarily turn it to its advantage. There is no point in trying to find some Archimedean fulcrum "outside" development, which development cannot attempt to make part of itself, and building opposition from there. [35 \(#fn035\)](#) This is only an extreme version of the illusion that development itself works to propagate - that it is converting something undeveloped or underdeveloped into something developed. It is an illusion which carries all the risks of Orientalism [36 \(#fn036\)](#) and of overestimation of development's influence.
- Equally there is no point in seeking an "inside" to development from which it might be reformed so that it is, in the aggregate, more responsive to the facts, more effective, or more accountable. No such reform is possible, and there is no conceivable point from which it could be undertaken. [37 \(#fn037\)](#) As authors such as Pauline Peters and James Ferguson have argued, it is necessary to go beyond the stultifying question of whether development is a "benevolent force to be reformed or an exploitative manoeuvre to be denounced". [38 \(#fn038\)](#) Discarding the notion that development is the implementation of theories or plans makes possible a more nuanced understanding of development officials which avoids the facile assumption that they must either believe or not believe the falsehoods they express.
- Actions in the struggle against development projects are taken in an intercultural space occupied simultaneously by development and other social forms and populated by actors playing concurrent roles in performances in multiple genres. Each action has both "development meanings" and many other meanings. Seen as part of the drama of

development, a protest against a World Bank-funded dam can be read only as an obstacle to progress, a call for "alternatives", or a prelude to further development schemes to mitigate or compensate for losses connected with the dam. Approached as an event within another genre of performance, the same event may be read as a moment in the struggle to sustain or create local livelihoods and as a battle against "alternatives" (i.e., those embodied by the dam and its effects), while the actions of World Bank staff involved are construed as obstructionist, mendacious or exploitative. Thus while the opponents of a development project cannot escape having their actions feed into an interpretive mechanism geared up to produce more such projects, development officials also cannot escape having their own actions reciprocally "contained" within other performances which accord them few of the privileges they seek. If development can process everything, so, simultaneously, can other genres.

- Development critics accordingly need not believe their actions are intelligible or effective only within the narrow genres of development or anti-development talk, with its intellectual formulas and global solutions. Making themselves answerable to specific movements can help campaigners see their actions as multiple in meaning and consequences. Understanding whom they are telling the truth to and for enables activists better to select those contexts of truth-telling which strain performances in the development genre to breaking point while simultaneously helping to craft effective concurrent performances in those other genres in which truth matters more. [39](#) ([#fn039](#))
- There is no such thing as a campaign principle or statement whose articulation "can't possibly do any harm". Even innocuous-sounding appeals for "more participation" can lead, depending on where they are made and to whom, to outcomes which undermine participation. The political meanings of such appeals are not contained in their texts but depend on the performances in which they find a place. Understanding these meanings is not a matter of academic theory but is itself a performance art requiring practice, experience, instinct, flexibility, sensitivity to circumstances, a sense of what lies over the horizon, and an ability to handle unforeseen consequences.

[Notes and References](#) ([#footnotesref](#))

[1](#) Majorities in the South face greater hardships today than 50 years ago, when the disparity in wealth between North and South was only one-sixth what it is today. "The hard fact," Jeffrey Sayer notes in the World Bank's Environment Paper No. 1 (1992), "is that most aid projects ... fail". For case materials on development's false claims, see George, S. and Sabelli, F., *Faith and Credit: The World Bank's Secular Empire*, Penguin, London,

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2 Hobart, op. cit. 1, p.2.

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3 Dove, M., "Theories of Swidden Agriculture and the Political Economy of Ignorance", *Agroforestry Systems* 1, 1983, p.95.

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4 Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance in the Practices of Development Policy", in Hobart, op. cit. 2, p.140.

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5 Dudley, E., *The Skeptical Villager*, Routledge, London, 1993.

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6 Dove, M., "Center, Periphery and Biodiversity: A Paradox of Governance and a Developmental Challenge" in Brush, Stephen B. and Stabinsky, Doreen, eds., *Valuing Local Knowledge: Indigenous People and Intellectual Property Rights*, Island Press, Washington, p.62.

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10 Rich, B., *Mortgaging the Earth*, op. cit. 1.

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11 Quarles van Ufford, op. cit. 4, p.138.

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12 Pigg, S. L., "Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1992, p.507.

(#fn012ref)

13 Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance", op. cit. 4, p.154.

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15 Mitchell, T., "The Use of an Image: America's Egypt and the

[\(#fn015ref\)](#) "Development Industry", *The Ecologist* 26 (1), Jan./Feb. 1996, pp.21-22.

[16](#) Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance", op. cit. 4, p.140.

[\(#fn016ref\)](#)

[17](#) Fairhead, J. and Leach, M., "False Forest History, Complicit Social Analysis: Rethinking Some West African Environmental Narratives", *World Development*, 23 (6), 1995, pp.1023-1035. As Oliver Rackham argues, such "misreadings of the landscape" are also widespread in Britain, where it has often been hard for forest managers to acknowledge that forests are as much social artifacts as are cathedrals. Results have included exterminations and destruction of heaths, coppices and pollards. See *The History of the Countryside*, London: Dent, 1986, pp.147-50.

[18](#) For treatments of other aspects of this "globalizer's dilemma" see [\(#fn018ref\)](#) Uphmann, L., "Resisting Green Globalism" in Sachs, W., ed., *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*, London: Zed Books, 1993, pp.157-69; "Green Orientalism", *The Ecologist* 23 (6), Nov./Dec. 1993, pp.202-204; "No Rules of Engagement" in Rigg, J., ed., *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand*, Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995, pp.211-34; "The Globalizer's Dilemma" in Thomas, C. and Wilkin, P., eds., *Globalization and the South*, London: Macmillan, 1997, pp.213-230 and "Mekong Dams in the Drama of Development", *Watershed* 3 (3), Mar./Jun. 1998, pp.211-234. See also Dieter-Evers, H. and Schrader, H., *The Moral Economy of Trade*, Routledge, London, 1994; Hobart, M., *An Anthropological Critique of Development*, op. cit. 1; Latour, B., *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994 and Scott, J. C., *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

[19](#) Pigg, S. L., "Inventing Social Categories through Place", op. cit. 12, [\(#fn019ref\)](#) pp.504-07.

[20](#) Norgaard, R., *Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Coevolutionary Revisioning of the Future*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp.138-39.

[21](#) Ferguson, J., *The Anti-Politics Machine*, op. cit. 14.

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[22](#) Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance", op. cit. 4, [\(#fn022ref\)](#) 138.

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28 SEATEC International Ltd., Nam Theun 2 Hydroelectric Project Environmental Assessment and Management Plan, draft May 1997.

29 Financial Times (London), 15 May 1996; Economist, 30 August 1997.

30 Other project effects which give the lie to claims of "improvement" remain unaddressed. For example, the yearly flush of Mekong water in and out of Huay Mong on which the migratory fish population rode has been blocked, wiping out what had been one support of the local economy.

31 Ferguson, J., *The Anti-Politics Machine*, op. cit. 14.

32 Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance", op. cit. 4, 141.

33 O'Neill, J., "Managing without Prices: The Monetary Valuation of Biodiversity," *Ambio* 26, 8, December 1997, p.550.

34 Quarles van Ufford, P., "Knowledge and Ignorance", op. cit. 4, p.141.

35 This does not mean that the pretence cannot be made for tactical reasons.

36 Said, E., *Orientalism*, Pantheon, New York, 1978; Haraway, D., *Primate Visions*, Routledge, New York, 1989.

37 For tactical reasons, again, campaigners may feign a belief in development's reformability.

38 Ferguson, J., *The Anti-Politics Machine*, op. cit. 14, p.14; Peters, P. et al., *Dividing the Commons: Politics, Policy and Culture in Botswana*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994, p.226.

39 Lohmann, L., "Mekong Dams in the Drama of Development", op. cit. (#fn039ra18), pp.58-60.

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