

DSA Gender Policy and Practice Study Group workshop

How can women influence current development paradigms? Validating knowledge and reclaiming spaces

And Book Launch: *Aid, NGOs and the Realities of Women's Lives: A Perfect Storm*

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Hosted by:

International Gender Studies (IGS) at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford

On June 7th, 2013

The workshop was a celebration of the **DSA study group** and its work over the past few years, and especially of the book that was, in large part, kick-started by discussions held within this forum. It provided the opportunity to share some chapters from the book and delve deeper into our own knowledge and experience to find new ways of creating and claiming key spaces for challenging the way that development work is currently planned, implemented and evaluated. It was also part of the **thirtieth anniversary celebrations** of another important space, **IGS**. From IGS, women's and gender studies have continued an active contribution to the wider University and development landscape.

Participants came to listen, share and think through their own experiences, and to discuss how to move beyond where we are now, to find new ways to work with women and their organisations. They also came to celebrate the book, and the achievement that it represents – not only logistically, but also in terms of opening out the space in which people can question and challenge current dominant paradigms.

Maria Jaschok of IGS opened the workshop by welcoming participants to Lady Margaret Hall, and speaking of the thirtieth anniversary year for IGS. She reminded the audience that an earlier DSA workshop held in IGS (in Feb. 2011) was the space in which the book began to take shape.

Tina Wallace spoke to thank everyone who contributed to the book, through writing, debates, and sharing their experiences and discussing issues. The 17 very varied authors and editors come together from their own starting points, with diverse experiences to share, yet there were strong shared themes that flowed through the book, relating to the current realities and constraints of development aid that is delivered through NGOs.

The context of development is changing fast, with new players arriving, especially from consultancy firms, and the demise of many others. There are multiple new policies, procedures, ways of applying, accounting, and reporting on aid funding, and a constant redefining of what is required from development in terms of success, impact, change at scale and so on. Above all the rules of evidence and what acceptable evidence is are changing fast; the redefining of acceptable evidence is having a perverse effect and results in a view that development up to now has failed, NGOs have not worked and what is needed is something new, in terms of delivery mechanisms, actors and results.

This contrasts with an analysis of history, as Amartya Sen who recently spoke in Oxford, highlighted: so much has changed for women globally because of the women's movement, women's agency and work at all levels of society to enable girls to get education, better health care, access to work and representation. While there is much that needs addressing still he saw the role of women's agency as especially important in moving development agendas from welfare to issues of empowerment, voice and being agents of change, for women and men. The role of civil society, including NGOs, has been important in promoting ideas, opportunities and spaces for women to act.

However, history is not appreciated in current norms, where approaches, learning, experience appear devalued and development exists in what David Lewis calls 'the perpetual present'. The book importantly reminds readers of what we have learned, what we know and what is being done with women by organisations that have a deep analysis, a political commitment, and a set of values that are committed to the agency of women and girls. This contrasts with the current focus on women and girls as recipients of external inputs, welfare, and where changes for them are couched in terms of benefits to GDP, their children, the community, with a silencing of their personal and wider social agendas for change.

Three authors – Alice Welbourn, Suzanne Walker, and David Harding - spoke eloquently on different aspects of both current constraints and distortions, 'the perverse incentives' often of aid frameworks and funding and alternative ways of approaching development and the marginalisation of women and communities.

Some of the core issues highlighted included the contestation around what evidence is, who defines it and how it is used, contrasting the strong feminist evidence base, where rigour is not based on the 'objectivity' (so valued by the scientific world), but on the quality of participation and the connection with communities. The importance of a multi-sectoral approach, often characterised as too complex to manage, is critical to working with people who live in complex adaptive systems, as is grappling with the diversity of people within communities: women, men, the poor, people with HIV. The challenges of getting funding for complex programmes, based on needs as defined by people themselves were highlighted, as was the way funding regimes are now in danger of dictating how NGOs behave and which programmes and projects they will or will not fund. The danger that the drive for organisational growth will over-shadow values and principles within the NGO sector is real and potentially corrosive, especially in the way practice is being changed to meet funding requirements.

More questions need to be asked about how constantly changing frameworks and requirements are affecting core values such as participatory approaches, listening to those most affected and involving them in developing strategies, taking time to learn about communities and contexts, and building relationships. There is a need to understand better why NGOs feel compelled sometimes to compromise on what they know works and to see how different NGOs handle the challenges of funding and pressure from e.g. donors and the private sector to show quick results and huge reach for their programmes.

So what does it mean to be a development practitioner in the context of the multiple 'pincer movement' of managerialism, competition for growth and funding, and the increasing influence of the private sector? The particular approach to management can be traced to the work of FW Taylor., whose 'command and control' model was based on an increasing mistrust of 'professionals', and the

insertion of aggressive control and supervision mechanisms dominated by compliance, rather than allowing and encouraging initiative.

Yet the real issues in development are complex 'messes' and require judgment, learning, and a thinking response. Management systems currently often prevent this and are part of the problem, rather than the solution with managers responding to the demands of the system, rather than to the needs and issues of communities and people on the ground. There is a consequent distortion and corruption of integrity in development work. In order to allow the space for the rigorous, qualitative, participatory feminist work to grow and develop, and inform our work, we need to return to a real understanding of practice. Several examples of this are presented in the book

Participants at the workshop then gathered in smaller groups to share case studies, stories, experiences and ideas around how, in the current climate, the spaces for women's voices and realities are being excluded in research, in teaching, in development practice and debates and how to reclaim these. Many participants spoke of how their work is increasingly constrained, and few could see the space in which to allow different ways of working to evolve and grow. In some ways this could be traced back to targets set in the MDGs and a focus on numbers as development and has deepened with each successive UK Government.

Some people wondered whether in fact NGOs need to stay small and concentrate on the quality of their partnerships and their work – even if this denies them access to the huge grants and accompanying levels of influence. Others suggested NGOs could broaden their partnerships with other actors – including social movements or Trade Unions – in order to develop possibilities for new collaborations and even alternative funding systems. The idea of using the book as a tool for promoting new conversations and different ways of conceptualizing the issues facing women and girls was popular, as was a need to think how to reclaim and open new spaces for these debates on the nature of funding of NGOs, and the best ways to work on issues of gender inequality. The culture of distrust needs challenging and debates about methodology and evidence need to be promoted to question current practice. It is important to find ways to reconnect to women's voices and our own experience and to be more questioning of what is happening.

The space to share and discuss these issues continues to be important, and the DSA study group and IGS provide safe and welcoming environments for those who want to question and 'change the conversation'. The workshop ended with drinks and networking.

Fenella Porter and Tina Wallace, Oxford, 24th June 2013.