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BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

**The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada: Development Programs and Democracy, 1964–1979**

**Will Langford, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, pp. 472.**

Rita Yembilah, Ambrose University ([Rita.Yembilah@ambrose.edu](mailto:Rita.Yembilah@ambrose.edu))

*The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada* is written for a reader well-versed in the politics and economics of global development and explores a Canadian perspective on that literature. At times the book is dense, but this is compensated for by the insights that Langford develops not from an abstract but from a practical lens. This style constitutes the strongest attraction of the book: each chapter recognizes the importance of development theory, but the volume is not a mere review of theories of development. On a substantive level, the book presents a nuanced portrait of the development paradigms of the time (1964–1979), which have come under increasing scrutiny since then; these include the paternalistic “white saviour” approaches evident in the Company of Young Canadians (CYC) and Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) initiatives of the 1960s, the paradox of Indigenous poverty in Canada, and the neoliberal development and poverty alleviation initiatives that are still perpetuated in various disguised forms in developing countries. The inclusion of Indigenous Canadians’ experiences with development and poverty alleviation is a particular strength of the book because it is almost never discussed in mainstream development education. The effect has been the lack of acute awareness of the poverty of Indigenous Canadians (outside Indigenous studies and scholarship) and the tendency of the Canadian development community to look elsewhere in the world in seeking to contribute to development and poverty alleviation.

It is striking and depressing to realize that in many ways, Canadian development practice both at home and around the world has not changed. There is an increasing move toward critical development studies and critical development practice in recent times, but it bears remembering that it is difficult to implement a decolonized development agenda. Thus, the low-hanging fruit of community development harnessing “community consultation” is nearly hegemonic, but once consultation is done, development practitioners proceed to implement the historical orthodoxy so well described in various sections of the book. As I read the book, it was not lost on me that some of my development studies students here in Canada would cringe at how development and poverty alleviation were pursued in the 1960s and 1970s, and even into the 1980s. I certainly know they cringe at structural adjustment programs and do not want to impose Western ideals of development on a non-Western context. This signals a shift in development practice awareness that I attribute to young peoples’ increasing awareness of the problem of climate change, accompanied by a politically correct positionality (where “politically correct” is not a pejorative phrase). The value of this book is in providing the necessary look back that allows us to situate the present in the past.

It is arresting to read about Indigenous Canadians' struggle not to be mere development tokens but to ensure the relevance of development to the concerns of their communities. This is covered in the introduction, as well as in chapter 1, which discusses community development in Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. It mirrored some of my observed experiences growing up in Ghana but is also evident in the present, where the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not have much resonance as a yardstick for development practice in Canada, particularly in Indigenous/First Nations communities. In March 2021, I was invited to a panel at the Assembly of First Nations conference on the SDGs, titled "Beyond Income Assistance." I was surprised when I was advised to not assume that the audience would know about the SDGs because it might be the first time many of them heard about them. I could not help but wonder how almost a decade after the rollout of the SDGs, they are not a household term in Indigenous and/or First Nations development dialogue/practice, even as Canada embeds SDG expectations in its global development agenda.

Langford's analysis is particularly illuminating in its juxtaposition of development initiatives in Canada and abroad. As someone who is most familiar with the African experience, I read chapter 5 (which focuses on the Cape Breton Development Corporation in Nova Scotia) and chapter 7 (which examines CUSO activities in Tanzania) with great interest. Even though the projects described were situated on different continents, both evidenced power dynamics that reflected the oft-repeated "development partners" mantra in developing countries and prefigured the neoliberal push from the 1980s onward to make the private sector the engine of growth. The nuances of power (which are, in fact, an undercurrent in the book) should make thoughtful reading for anyone concerned with the interests of people in developing countries, which include wanting to own their destinies and not allow global powers (whoever they are perceived to be) to cheat them out of their resources.

"I am going to ask you to think about development from the point of view that it is people who matter. Not bricks and concrete. Not even coal and steel. They are means to an end, servants, not masters. The only development that is worthwhile is concerned with people, with how people live; especially, with how they earn a living" (Tom Kent, quoted in Langford, 180). If there were a sentence to summarize this book, it would be this. In my view, it embodies what development is about but also accentuates how people can be relegated to the background when the development community is busily *doing* development. It manifests in the Canadian social services sector as working with "people with lived experience" (PWLEs) amid the trend of tokenizing lived experience. Its parallel overseas is a perfunctory "community consultation" that has been reduced to Rapid Appraisals. Placing Canada in its local and global context, it is interesting that drawing on the lived experience of poverty and social disadvantage is the current best practice for informing development action, but the concept barely surfaces in Canada's global development outreach. Along the same lines, the mantra of "grassroots development" is part of best practice, but it has not achieved much for the grassroots in many a developing country and community. In parts of Latin America, trying to centre people in development is brave and difficult work, as the criminalization of advocacy is a present danger. If there is one main takeaway from this book, it must be that it provides material to reflect on why the development community does development work, and how it is being done. *The Global Politics of Poverty in Canada* is a deeply researched book that refocuses our attention on people in the development milieu and adds historical and comparative context to readers' perspectives on the complexities of development practice.