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Reimagining Development:

How do practice-based approaches shape the localisation of development?

Papers from Reimagining Development Workshop Series

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Foreword

Everyone agrees that change is required in the way development is thought of, talked about, and done. Various efforts over the past decade have attempted this change. Significant resources have been spent in fine tuning approaches, sharpening tools, and adapting methods. It can be argued, however, that these efforts have neither adequately reflected development contexts nor have shown the ability to be agile. Where they have been contextual and relevant, they have not been able to scale. A variety of reasons may have constrained attempts at changing our practice of development. These include some fundamental realities that ought to be recognized and incorporated in our work.

First, the shifts and disruptions in context are substantial and cannot be problematized in the way we have done thus far. From the rise of China, to the mobilities of persons and ideas, and climate change-related calamities, twenty-first century contexts are quite different….and uncertain. The uncertainty should be engaged knowing that calculated ambiguity, i.e. human agency intersecting with information and knowledge, plays a part. How do we do account more fully in our work for the manipulation of information and knowledge in “uncertain” or “risky” development contexts?

Second, the landscapes of inequality and justice no longer remain confined to other places; they are also at home and a source of great disruption to the politics of development. How do we approach these?

Third, we need to acknowledge the path dependency of funding that both enables and constrains the way that development unfolds. This dilemma must be soberly considered and thoughtfully engaged if real change is to take place.

Fourth, rethinking is insufficient: reimagining is required. We ought to be childlike in our curiosity about the contexts that are before us, not being constrained by settled wisdom that is based on a different, previous imagination of context. Investing and searching in this way requires a reimagination of the way we have appraised context, the way we have talked about it, and the way we have practiced in it.

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Background

On 9 November 2020, the Institute for Global Development hosted a virtual roundtable to explore why our ways of thinking and engaging development thus far may be inadequate, and to discuss some of the struggles we have in understanding uncertainty from practice and disciplinary lenses, how locally rooted insights assist us, and how we approach and craft the participation of local communities in development efforts. Participants interacted around five short papers with the help of authors and designated commentators. The intention was to have an open-ended conversation that echoed, challenged, and supplemented the reimagining ideas explored in the papers. A summary of the papers, available in this report in full, is available here:

Paper 1: Reimagining Development for a Disrupted World
Dr George Varughese argues that the disruptions and shifts in development contexts of the 21st century are substantial enough to require a reimagining of disciplinary referents, signifiers, and orientations while supporting activities that (re)insert deeply contextual and practical knowledge to reframe the discourse and the practice of development.

Paper 2: The Significance of History for Development
Professor Bernardo Michael reflects upon how the work of historians can provide lessons for development practitioners on how to be more critical of their own starting points, assumptions, and expectations.

Paper 3: COVID-19: An opportunity to localise and reimagine development in the Pacific?
Professor Chris Roche and Dr Lisa Denney draw on emerging research from the Pacific to explore the ways in which localization/locally led development, conditioned in uncertain and ambiguous contexts, shapes new approaches to development practice.

Paper 4: Public Participation in Development Initiatives within Conflict Affected Contexts

Dr Dinesha Samararatne analyzes experiences in public participation in constitution-making in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka to suggest six dimensions that must be taken into account in developing and implementing programs for public participation whether in development initiatives, policy-development, law reform or constitution-making.

Paper 5: Reframing Developmental Practice: Learning from Deliberative Practice and Action Research-based Strategies

Dr Mani Ram Banjade and Dr Hemant Ojha review, from the perspective of knowledge politics, action-based learning, and deliberation, a set of experimental, successful practitioner initiatives in Nepal that seek to develop strategies and methods to improve the knowledge interface and policy learning in development contexts.

COVID-19: An opportunity to localise and reimagine development in the Pacific?

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Locally led development has received significant attention over the last 20 years as a principle and process that can lead to more effective and sustainable social change. There are also a number of documented examples of how development agencies can sensitively support these processes through a better understanding of context, politically savvy and adaptive approaches and helping to create greater space for local leadership to emerge. Numerous policy statements manifestos and communities of practice espouse the importance of locally-led development work and make commitments to deepening the practice of doing so (OECD 2008; OECD 2012; TWP Community of Practice 2013; The DDD Manifesto 2014).

But despite this, progress to implement localisation agendas in development assistance has been patchy at best. There is certainly much mention of localisation in program documents and some efforts to ensure that 'partner' voices are more routinely included in program design, implementation and monitoring. Yet the command-and-control style approach remains dominant, where donor staff retain most of the levers of power and expect 'partners' to perform tasks and report on metrics set out by the donor (Honig 2018). As Degan Ali noted recently (2020), 'localisation' has also been used as a fundraising tool by many international NGOs that know it is a popular donor trend, but do not follow through in ceding power to local actors in practice. As a result, localisation is too often a reframing of existing ways of working with a shift in emphasis, rather than a meaningful transformation of development practice.

This paper first briefly outlines the role of 'the local' in aid discourse, highlighting its importance but also the need to engage critically with the concept. Second, it seeks to

explain the dissonance between rhetorical commitments to localisation on the one hand, and limited changes in practice. It points to the importance of organisational processes and procedures that act to retain, rather than share, power, and the incentives of the aid sector and associated identities that maintain 'othering' at their core. Third, the paper considers whether and how critical junctures like the COVID-19 pandemic provide opportunities to support greater localisation, combined also with momentum from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, efforts to decolonise development practice and greater recognition of truly global developmental challenges. It suggests that the natural experiment of expatriate aid staff leaving Pacific Island nations during COVID-19 has revealed opportunities for deepening localisation efforts that must be grasped before staff return to 'normal' ways of working. The final section of the paper sets out some initial ideas as to how the aid industry might avoid the return to normal by recognising the importance of day-day practices and their origins, starting with social change processes – not development projects; coming to grips with uncertainty; valuing multiple forms of knowledge; and thinking hard about identity – not just strategy.

In making this argument, the paper brings together three strands of research. First, it draws on the growing literature on critical localism (see, for instance, Mac Ginty 2015; Roepstorff 2020; Dinnen and Allen 2018) to frame the importance, but also the perils, of engaging with 'the local'. Second, it builds on academic and grey literature that investigates how development agencies can support local leadership, much of which has been undertaken as part of the Developmental Leadership Program (Roche and Denney 2019; Denney and McLaren 2016). Third, it relies on ongoing primary research being conducted by the Institute for Human Security and Social Change (IHSSC) at La Trobe University, in collaboration with the Australian Red Cross and the Humanitarian Advisory Group, on COVID-19 impacts on organisational adaptation and ways of working in the Pacific (paper forthcoming; see also Australian Red Cross et al 2020).

What is it about 'the local'?

The aid industry has been the focus of sustained critiques for its top-down, externally-led, social engineering projects that result – at best – in 'thin' change or isomorphic mimicry (see, for instance, Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2012). In response, development agencies have increasingly turned to 'the local' as a legitimising claim,

suggesting support for, or ownership of, programs by those they are intended to assist and sustainability beyond the timeframes of donor funding. As Roger Mac Ginty notes, development agencies have seen the local as able to 'rescue internationally funded and directed peacebuilding by giving it authenticity and paving the way towards an exit strategy for international actors' (2015: 840). This is perhaps demonstrated no better than by the proliferation of 'partnerships' with 'local' actors that remain entirely transactional in nature but provide a nod to wider donor trends (Smith 2017).

Yet, the ways in which 'the local' is used in development and humanitarian discourse is problematic. It is imagined as both the problem (the source of governance dysfunction, conflict and poverty), as well as the solution to the shortcomings of development assistance (Mac Ginty 2015: 847). It is also often unhelpfully 'constructed in binary opposition to the international' – as if these are two discrete geographies (Roepstorff 2020: 285). The local is thus demonised, romanticised and reduced to a caricature of parochialism. Moreover, where international organisations co-opt 'the local' as merely the latest trend without it transforming their engagement with people who constitute this 'local', the shift becomes hollow, involving no change to existing power relations, and risks doing harm to the legitimacy of those they work with.

'Critical localism' has emerged as a response to these slippery uses of 'the local', recognising its multiple and contested meanings, its intersections with and embeddedness within other scales or geographies, as well as its ambivalent nature (Mac Ginty 2015; Roepstorff 2020; Dinnen and Allen 2018). This in turn leads us into more complex understandings of what constitutes legitimacy, representation and elite capture at different local levels (Craney, 2020), as well as helping to explain how conceptions and presentations of the local can be deployed and mobilised to further particular interests (Roche, 2020). This paper attempts to engage with this more nuanced depiction of 'the local' – recognising its usefulness where it genuinely transforms power relations and prioritises change processes driven by local actors who would pursue them regardless of external support (McCulloch and Piron 2019: 8).

Dissonance between localisation in theory and practice

Although many international organisations are onboard with the idea of localisation and can see the value that more localised response is likely to provide, they

nonetheless struggle to cede power in meaningful ways. This is not (in all cases) a cynical effort to deny real localisation. Rather, it speaks to the organisational identities and incentives that skew the international aid community into sustaining particular worldviews and ways of working, even when we know that these are not the most effective ways of achieving change (Faustino and Booth 2014; Roche and Denney 2019). Increasingly, these worldviews and ways of working are described as colonial or indeed racist, given the inequitable power relations they are borne from and perpetuate (Pailey 2020).

The seemingly boring, bureaucratic processes within international organisations are themselves deeply political and act to ensure that power remains in the hands of the organisation, rather than those it supports (Honig and Gulrajani 2018). This extends from human resources processes that enable the organisation to control decisions about whose expertise is suitable and valued, for what timeframes and at what pay scales (Peake and Spark, forthcoming). It includes finance departments that devise pro forma contracts for partners that stipulate what is to be delivered when and to what standards, as well as who owns intellectual property developed from projects. And it includes reporting requirements that replicate abstract metrics for judging what constitutes success and whether it is being achieved in timescales demanded by predetermined logic models (Eyben et al. 2015). Allowing local leadership of the change processes is incredibly difficult when organisations retain these kinds of operating processes (Smith 2017). These ways of working in international organisations are, in turn, shaped by the demands of donors, further orienting ways of working towards headquarters in capital cities and away from people on the ground (Roche and Denney 2019).

Staff working within aid organisations frequently refer to the need to work 'politically' within their own organisations to navigate these processes and offset their most pernicious effects (Denney and MacLaren, 2016). The procedures are seen to be necessary controls and checks, often to fulfil accountability functions, but are simultaneously recognised as making good aid practice more difficult. What is acknowledged less frequently is that these 'necessary' controls and checks are themselves deeply political and maintain the inequitable power relations that the aid industry is, at least in theory, in the business of trying to change.

Such organisational processes are rooted in broader sets of ideas and the wider political economy. These include the conscious and unconscious biases, values and social norms which are inherent in the notion of a 'development' agency – that is, an institution which has helping or developing 'others' as its primary purpose and identity. This identity is itself problematic given the othering that it involves – holding 'beneficiaries' as separate and apart from those who bring the 'benefits' of development (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2018). And, of course, that identity is further shaped by political demands to serve other interests whether that be domestic (Yanguas 2018), economic, or simply driven by the primacy of organisational survival. Moves towards more locally led development practice may thus be well-intentioned, but remain thin because when they run into the stumbling blocks of organisational processes, and the wider political economy and identity of aid organisations themselves.

COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and Decolonisation of Development: Critical junctures for change?

Enter 2020. A confluence of events in 2020 have brought the limitations of existing ways of working in international development to the fore. The COVID-19 global pandemic, the BLM movement and growing calls for the decolonisation of international development have combined with ongoing advocacy for tackling shared global challenges, such as climate change and inequality, to fundamentally question existing ways of working. Stemming from this, the scales seem to be tipping towards greater emphasis on locally-led processes but the extent to which this occurs – and, importantly, is sustained in ways that genuinely seek to change power relations – remains to be seen.

The experience of many development programs around the world throughout COVID-19 has laid bare that local people, organisations and the local staff of international organisations can often fare just fine when expatriates step back. This is not to deny the impacts of COVID-19, particularly on Pacific economies and the risks that large outbreaks would pose. Nor is it to deny the importance of continued financial and technical support when it is requested. But as expatriate staff returned home from the countries they were working in, a significant shift in the demography of aid staff occurred. Particularly in the Pacific, where many Australians rushed home as Australia

closed its international border, there was an exodus of expatriate staff. So how did these programs fare, with international experts all back home? Ongoing research with Pacific Islanders suggests that, on the whole, programs adapted and pivoted to respond to the COVID crisis and that remote support has largely been successful where local staff were empowered. Importantly, Pacific Islanders note a change in their working environment to be more culturally literate stemming from this. Tapping into momentum from the BLM movement, efforts to decolonise development and greater recognition of shared global challenges, this changed working environment is also more fundamentally challenging existing development practice.

Learning, adapting, pivoting

Rather than collapsing or stalling in the wake of COVID-19, aid programs continued, pivoted and even expanded to address the acute needs arising from the crisis, governments responded promptly and local communities adopted coping mechanisms based on decades of experience. In most Pacific countries COVID-19 cases have remained very low, as of 30/11/20 Nauru, Tonga, Kiribati, Micronesia, Palau, and Tuvalu have had zero cases. With expatriate staff operating largely at a distance, local staff have had greater opportunity for leadership and authority. High quality Pacific Islander staff with deep knowledge and networks were resourcefully drawn on at short notice to ensure program responsiveness to emerging needs.

For instance, the Australia-Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) utilised its deep knowledge of the Pacific, its broad networks within the region and its flexible and adaptive program modality to reorient training programs to respond to the COVID context. This included supporting Pacific Island people working in hospitality and tourism in Australia to quickly retrain to Australian standards in aged care, to ensure their ongoing employment. It also involved rapidly leveraging networks to develop online micro-credentials to continue the upskilling of hospitality workers who lost their employment as tourism in the Pacific quickly declined. Working in collaboration with local tourism associations, United Nations agencies and mobile phone companies to provide data at reduced rates to students, APTC was able to ensure that those who lost their jobs due to COVID still had access to opportunities to support their longer term economic wellbeing. And in Vanuatu, APTC collaborated with DFAT and a local

theatre group to produce radio training programs supporting work-readiness, based on adapting an existing APTC curriculum.

In the Solomon Islands, Pacific Islander staff working for development agencies found that the limitations on what orthodox data collection methods were possible during the pandemic provided greater space for experimenting with more varied forms of monitoring and evaluation. This has included forms that draw on narrative storytelling, such as Talonoa and Tok Stori – common ways of capturing and sharing knowledge in the Melanesian context that values experiential knowledge (Sanga and Reynolds 2020). In some cases, these forms of monitoring and evaluation have resulted in more locally meaningful data that staff would like to see retained beyond the pandemic. During this period time the Pacific Community has also launched a Pacific-centred and owned approach to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). This is itself the product of a region wide talanoa process of consultation, and which references the Kakala framework from Tonga, the Rebbilib navigational stick maps from the Marshall Islands, and the Vanua framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) from Fiji, seeking to reclaim notions of monitoring and evaluation in ways that are consistent with Pacific understandings and worldviews. (SPC, 2020)

Remote support worked where trust rather than surveillance prevailed

Seventy per cent of Pacific Islander staff surveyed indicated an increase in remote support in the context of COVID-19 (Australian Red Cross et al: 7). Interviews with Pacific Islanders on the whole revealed strong approval – and even a preference – for remote support where it was based on trust, rather than surveillance. Moreover, those programs that coped well with expatriates leaving were those that had consciously invested in local staff, local ownership and local relationships prior to COVID-19.

Many Pacific Islanders interviewed noted the usefulness of having assistance from expatriate colleagues available at the end of the phone, or for short-term assistance. This was often expressed as the preferred option, compared with technical assistance being based in Pacific offices full-time, which was perceived to create relationships of dependency (Australian Red Cross et al 2020: 7). Remote support arrangements were viewed most positively where international staff provided needed technical advice, coaching and mentoring from a distance, with local staff filtering that with their cultural/political expertise, and then having the freedom to lead on the ground

(Australian Red Cross et al 2020: 7). Remote support was also valued for allowing local actors to get on with the job by 'buffering' them from the compliance demands of international project management systems (Australian Red Cross et al 2020: 7). Sometimes the preference for remote support was simply expressed as a rejection of surveillance or control: 'We don't need white people hovering over us.'

Thus, international staff have been providing effective and valued remote support, but past relationships, strong cultural and country understanding, and trust are vital to this being productive. Where remote support has been experienced more as surveillance to ensure that Pacific Islander staff are working and meeting the expectations of expatriate staff, with little power to actually get on with things, it has – unsurprisingly – not been empowering. Yet paradoxically, the characteristics of good remote support – strong understanding, relationships and trust – all require knowledge of, and experience in, the region to work well; they cannot be easily built without being physically present.

Pacific experiences of the workplace

Interviews with Pacific Islander staff found that whilst they were initially concerned about the new responsibilities they had suddenly inherited with the departure of their expatriate colleagues, they felt that they learnt to adapt quite well and realised that actually they did not even need the expatriate advisors they had become used to and assumed they needed. Moreover, the workplace environment was described to have changed in ways that required less negotiation of their personal and professional lives. Quite practically, this meant things like more meetings happening in local languages, prayers more routinely integrated into meetings, children more frequently in the office after school. Importantly, Pacific Islander staff described this as resulting in more laughter and a more comfortable working environment where they felt less surveilled and freer to think creatively and identify options and solutions. In some cases, jockeying for power amongst senior Pacific Islander staff was said to occur, but also that reduced formality meant that there was increased communication and collaboration within and across organisations. Having experienced this new way of working, Pacific Islander staff now they want to do things differently beyond COVID-19.

Nonetheless, the empowerment being reported still reverberates with legacies of colonial approaches to aid practice and Pacific Islanders also noted a nervousness to step into leadership roles due to fears that this must resemble the model established by international managers, and that they will not be supported by their international colleagues if they fail. 2020 has also witnessed the rise of the BLM movement and associated efforts to decolonise international development, drawing attention to and challenging the structural racism implicit in many of our accepted practices and institutions (Mwambari 2019; Leon-Himmelstine and Pinet 2020). The BLM and decolonisation of development movements have amplified existing calls from the global South for those involved in the aid industry to recognise how power and privilege is experienced and make practical changes in how they work to address inequities (Pailey 2020). This speaks directly to the need for greater local leadership and better allyship by supporting organisations. But it also highlights the scale of the challenge. Pacific Islanders interviewed spoke about a continuing 'colonisation of the mind,' whereby they feel as if they are unable to match the expertise of expatriates, even when they know this is not the case. Such legacies continue to have an impact beyond the simple presence or absence of actors from outside the region.

Finally, greater global advocacy and attention around issues such as climate change, violence against women and equity is also prompting reflection on whether current ways of working in development and humanitarian action are up to tackling these truly universal challenges (Oldekop et al. 2020). As the universality of these challenges is recognised, cutting across any notion of 'developed' or 'developing' countries, outdated ideas of development and humanitarian response being a one-way transfer of knowledge and skills become impossible to maintain. Rather, such challenges require a truly global response, bringing to bear the knowledge, innovation and ideas from all parts of the world and learning together. The very challenges with which we are increasingly confronted thus also push towards international development and humanitarian actors ceding power and sharing leadership with local actors. In this sense, the experience of aid programming in the Pacific during COVID-19 builds on wider momentum from the BLM and decolonisation of development movements, as well as the growing attention to shared global challenges, to level a challenge to conventional development practice. The aid community has an opportunity to respond by committing to transform its ways of working before defaulting to business as usual.

Implications for how development might be reimagined

What then, might these critical junctures mean for reimagining development? COVID-19, the BLM and decolonising international development movements and increasingly global challenges all highlight 'the falsity of any assumption that the global North has all the expertise and solutions to tackle global challenges, and … the need for multi-directional learning and transformation in all countries towards a more sustainable and equitable world' (Oldekop et al. 2020: 1). For international organisations, as Degan Ali notes (2020), those that survive this turbulence will be those that are willing to change their business model and ways of working to be a real partner. If localising development is to be achieved, then international organisations and donors will have to be willing to change their internal day-to-day workings in ways that fundamentally cede power.

Some starting points for thinking and acting differently might include: recognising the importance of day-day practices and their origins; the need to decentre the development industry and the development project which can dominate debate; to take uncertainty and ambiguity – and the politics of both – much more seriously; noting the importance of valuing and weaving together different forms of knowledge; and thinking much harder about identity and the act of being and becoming as the spring board for reimagining development. Below, each of these starting points are elaborated.

1. **Recognise the significance and origins of day to day practices**

The subtle shifts in ways of working which have occurred in the Pacific during the pandemic have revealed not only local preferences, but also exposed how power relations are embodied in everyday practices. The fact, for example, that some teams are now holding meetings in local languages or more regularly praying during meetings is starting to provoke questions about why these practices were not happening before, simply because non-locals were in the room. This in turn raises interesting issues about the way that habits can become routines, and then part of an organisation's culture. It sometimes takes a shock to the system for these habits to be illuminated, and their origins to be debated. In the same way that exploring unconscious bias is seen as important in revealing hitherto concealed assumptions and stereotypes, analysing and shifting day to day practices can have disproportionate effect given

organisational ways of working are in some senses a 'lagging measure' of habits. This is not to deny of course, as noted above, power relations are also embedded in the policies and procedures of organisations, and these are in turn shaped by the broader political economy of the sector. Rather it is to suggest that there is an important linkage between everyday practices and structural drivers, and perhaps there is more scope to adjust internal ways of working than is generally thought.

2. **Start with social change not the development project**

Those initiatives which seem to have adapted well to the shock of COVID-19 share a number of characteristics with other programs which have been able to support locally led change. These include a significant investment in local staff, organisations and relationships; the adoption of learning and reflection process that have allowed for flexibility and adaptation; and the creation of space for experimentation. Furthermore, recent research on locally led non-aid social change initiatives in the Pacific points to the importance of preferences for informal ways of working, holistic ways of thinking, the importance placed on maintaining good relationships and collective deliberation (Roche et al, 2020). The authors note how these preferences and ways of working are often seen, or felt, to be at odds with western modes of thought and the conventional practice of development agencies (Roche et al, 2020). All of which suggests that the search for genuinely locally led development practice needs to start somewhere different. Not with the projects or programs of development agencies, but with the emergent and more immanent processes of social and women's movements, activists and collective action. This provides a useful reminder of how decentring the world of formal institutionalised development can help reveal not only how more fluid processes of social change occur, but also what the shortcomings are of more deliberate, intentional project-based attempts to promote local leadership. Further exploration of other 'indigenous' processes of locally led change in the Pacific and beyond might be instructive and help to build a broader and deeper repository of case studies and avoid development as social engineering.

3. **Come to grips with the politics of uncertainty**

The COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific has also brought to the fore issues of how to cope with uncertainty and shocks, as well as what resilience in the face of the unknown

looks like. As John Kay and Mervyn King have recently noted, there has been a long debate – particularly between economists – about the difference between risk and uncertainty (Kay and King, 2020). Exploring the politics of uncertainty more fully reveals the dangers of how the search for certainty can lead to 'foreclosing futures' and excluding diverse perspectives, and therefore why we need to avoid the 'calculative control' that comes with the pursuit of certainty (Scoones & Stirling, 2020). Scoones and Stirling argue that 'the embracing of uncertainties – as constructions of knowledge, materiality, experience, embodiment and practice – means challenging singular notions of modernity and progress as a hard- wired 'one-track' 'race to the future' (Scoones & Stirling, 2020: 1). They therefore advocate for 'qualities of doubt (rather than certainty), scepticism (rather than credulity) and dissent (rather than conformity)' (Scoones & Stirling, 2020: 11). Notwithstanding the recent chorus of 'adaptive management' in the international development community, and nods towards non-linear change, much of this is still grounded in notions of predictability and much of it remains apolitical. This would suggest that any reimagining of development needs to also be founded on reimagining not only how to think about uncertainty and ambiguity, but the practices which might flow from that. This in particular suggests revising and resisting forms of planning and reporting which are premised on order and control, particularly in unpredictable environments (Honig, 2019). And avoiding forms of monitoring, evaluation and learning which are focused on assessing progress on the basis of pre-determined indicators set at the outset of an initiative when least is known, or indeed knowable. It also means, as Yuen Yuen Ang cogently reminds us, that what might be deemed weak 'institutions' from one narrow teleological or normative perspective, can in fact be 'functionally strong' in other contexts (Ang, 2016). All of which suggests that building the environment which enables locally led processes of improvisation, dialogue and adaptation is of particular importance.

4. Value multiple forms of knowledge

The increased space for experimentation that seems to have emerged in recent months in the Pacific has seen a revaluing of indigenous forms of knowledge and research, as noted above. Andy Haldane of the Bank of England noted following the Global Financial crisis that one of the reasons that they were not in a good position to 'see it coming' was the uniformity of their thinking, particularly when it came to risk

and how it might be best managed. Experience in research-policy collaborations – recently applied to the COVID-19 pandemic – similarly underscores the value of bringing scientific, policy and community stakeholders together in open and transparent ways, and how 'bounded mutuality' i.e. the ability to accommodate conflicting evidence and 'sustained interactivity' between actors are key (Georgalakis 2020). In indigenous Australia, processes which have successfully 'weaved together' knowledge and experience which encompass both indigenous and western knowledge, have pointed to ways in which 'multiple evidence bases' and knowledge systems can be mobilised with appropriate expertise and care (Austin et al, 2018). Others have long pointed to the prospects for deliberative and democratic processes involving citizens in renewing political life, but also point to the fact that this won't happen by itself (Dryzek et al, 2019). At the heart of this issue is recognising the politics of evidence, and the recognition of the importance therefore of the governance of evidence production and use, or indeed misuse (Parkhurst, 2017).

This is not a romanticised call for ousting of all generalisable knowledge and replacing it with local knowledge. Rather, and in line with notions of 'critical localism' it is a recognition that some forms of knowledge and evidence tend to be privileged over others, and this is part of how power and politics operate locally, as well as globally.

5. Think hard about identity

There is evident interest in the Pacific about Black Lives Matter and the decolonising of development and research. Indeed, we believe that these phenomena have also contributed to what we have observed in the Pacific in the last nine months. These movements have galvanised activists[1] and a growing community of Pacific academics are part of this process as they try to 'rewrite Pacific research from Pacific people's ontological understandings of the world' (Naepi, 2019). Development agencies spend a lot of time thinking and talking about strategy: what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. They spend much less time talking about their identity: who they are. However, recent experience in New Zealand/Aotearoa of an international NGO seeking to come to grips with its bicultural and Pacific identity points to the potential of agencies – at least in settler states such as Australia and New Zealand – to more deeply question the degree to which their values, world views

[1] See https://www.thecoconet.tv/coco-talanoa/blog/black-lives-matter-protests-galvanise-pasifika/

and relationships might be transformed by a richer engagement with indigenous peoples and knowledge, and the history of their own nations (Finlayson, forthcoming). This does not suggest a return to a more domestic or parochial view of the world. Rather, it represents a kind of simultaneous exploration of both intimate and personal as well as what some have called a 'larger us' (Evans, 2019). Asking questions about identity and place, also demands that bigger questions are asked about the 'othering' of development discourse, and about collective investment in the common good and our common humanity.

Conclusion

There is a range of literature which seeks to reimagine or reclaim development, to pursue postdevelopment, and/or to decentre or bury the notion of development for good. Much of this scholarly work critiques traditional development agencies, and the ways they tend to reproduce inequitable power relations, as well the concepts of development they propagate. At the same time this body of work emphasises the continuing need to address questions of global equity and injustice, whilst also emphasising that understandings of development need to remain plural and evolving (Escobar, 2018; Klein & Morreo, 2019).

We have suggested that the experience in the Pacific we have documented above gives rise to a number of issues which those working in add around the international development sector might well consider. They give rise to questions about ways of being and interacting as the starting point, rather than questions of strategy or tactics.

Arguably the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects has shone a bright light on pre-existing inequalities whilst at the same creating new spaces and opportunities for different forms of collaboration and ways of working to emerge. As the natural experiment that has been unleashed evolves, and as the porosity of national boundaries becomes even more evident, it would seem critically important to be sharing experiences of how locally led practices can inform a broader debate on the new forms of international collaboration which our world so urgently requires.

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