

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Horizontal Development: Shifting Power and Privilege in Aid***

By Shonali Banerjee, Anne-Meike Fechter and Thabani Mutambasere (Bristol University Press, 2025)

Reviewed by Kate Newman

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International development, the term coined in 1949 following Truman's pronouncement of two-thirds of the world as 'underdeveloped' has generally been understood as a 'vertical' endeavour. Often characterised by transfers of money from the Global North to the Global South usually with conditionalities attached, determining what money is spent on, and how it is spent. Critiques of this have existed for many years, identifying the power dynamics that accompany the financial flows, as well as the wider politics within which wealth accumulation has taken place, suggestive that the development project is merely a manifestation of ongoing western imperialism (cf. Escobar 1994, Esteva 1992<sup>1</sup>). However, disquiet regarding the way aid and other development funds are distributed, and how power relations in the sector are configured have become more mainstream in recent years (hence the title of this Special Issue and the focus on Shift the Power). At times these debates can be polarising, with some calls to do development differently suggesting that current modalities are doing more harm than good, while others emphasising the ongoing importance of life-saving aid.

*Horizontal Development* offers us a way out of these polarities; arguing that the focus on development as determined by the current aid system is itself limiting. The overriding attention on development aid, and the system created by it, excludes most development activity which exists outside. Moreover, this focus is itself colonial: privileging a specific set of activity shaped by historic power relations and therefore reinforcing power inequities. Banerjee et al suggest instead we should pay attention to the myriads of horizontal development initiatives, woven into the fabric of society. These both pre-date the international development project, and have emerged more recently, outside the sphere of international development. By focusing on these we can 'step sideways' rather than looking vertically, which enables us to understand development differently – aid driving by commonalities, rather than differences.

Rooted in a series of empirical examples drawn from the authors own experience and research, the book navigates through a broad range of activities that can be characterised through their horizontal relationships. These include south-south development cooperation<sup>2</sup>; professional volunteering (and

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<sup>1</sup> Escobar, A (1994) *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, and Esteva, G (1992) *Development in Sach, W (ed) (1992) The Development Dictionary: A guide to Knowledge as Power*, London, Zed Books, pp 6-26

<sup>2</sup> The authors note that this has existed for many years, emerging in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century during the formal decolonisation period, but is often overlooked in the focus on OCED DAC members (which do not include China, India or Brazil for example despite the large value of assistance – money, goods and services - that flow).

voluntourism); localisation and local aid; faith-based approaches; diaspora-led development; transnational citizen aid, digital humanitarianism, mutual aid and solidarity. They do this with three objectives:

- To make visible (and relevant) the diverse of forms of ‘assistance’ which exist across the world, and therefore shift focus from the current dominant narratives on aid – *changing the terms of the conversation*
- To ensure that these forms are also explored from the perspective of power, privilege and hierarchy, noting that power dynamics exist at every level within every grouping and that it is important to deeply engage in this complexity, to understand their potential, and their limitations
- Provide inspiration to and broaden the horizons of students and young people who are considering their career in development – enabling them to look beyond the problematic nature of vertical development and consider the full gamut of initiatives they could join

In doing this they note that while they are not deliberately focusing on decolonising development, the approach – of disrupting dominant narratives and centring (and evidencing) activity that has previously been marginalised does shift attention and by implication contributes to the decolonisation efforts.

What results is a very readable book, with each chapter following a similar format. The form of assistance is described with key characteristics identified, which are then unpacked through using an empirical example; bringing to life the nuance and challenge that underlies each experience. This is then analysed, and the chapters end with a clear articulation of how power and privilege work in this particular form of assistance, and therefore what the wider implications for horizontal development and the potential of this specific approach might be.

I found some chapters were more convincing than others in this regard.

The analysis of the socio-political remittances that sit alongside the very large financial remittances (\$656 billion in 2023<sup>3</sup>) sent by the diaspora to their country of origin was a fascinating portrayal of both the positive and more challenging impacts of diaspora engagement. Using the example of the Zimbabwean community in the UK the authors describe how the diaspora experience in their host country influences their engagement with and perspective on the country of origin. In this case leading the educated middle-class Zimbabweans, some of whom were former activists in Zimbabwe, to lobby UK MPs, and export ideas about democratic functioning from the UK to Zimbabwe; a very different practice from the diaspora working in Qatar to build stadiums in the lead up to the 2024 Olympics. At the same time the financial flows can lead diaspora to replicate existing unequal power relations, funding what they consider important. Suggesting that diaspora remittances, while operating at a large volume, especially when compared to shrinking aid budgets (2023 has been identified as the year of peak aid at \$223 billion<sup>4</sup>, so about a third of the remittances budget) are complex, begging the question of why remittances are not paid greater attention to in the shift the power movement.

This highly insightful example contrasted with the discussion on voluntourism. Although the characterisation of white saviourism and extreme power inequities was well described, I was less convinced by the example used exploring the practice in Asia of a particular company demonstrating

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/06/26/remittances-slowed-in-2023-expected-to-grow-faster-in-2024#:~:text=Share%20more,official%20development%20assistance%20\(ODA\).](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/06/26/remittances-slowed-in-2023-expected-to-grow-faster-in-2024#:~:text=Share%20more,official%20development%20assistance%20(ODA).)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/en/events/2025/01/official-development-assistance-oda-2023-final-figures.html>

a high degree of corruption and hostile behaviour. There are clearly distinct hierarchies of power in voluntourism. However, it is more questionable as to whether a firm which appeared to have poor senior leadership and limited space for employees to raise the issues is representative of the field as a whole.

That said many of the chapters were filled with fascinating stories and good quality analysis, which convinced me that a focus on horizontal development might help us break free of the polarising debate that is taking place in international development today.

I appreciated the attention paid to localisation as *a transitive verb*, and the argument that it should not be about the international moving to the local, but rather local actors defining the relationships and roles they would find useful and complementary to their local practice. The points made about the importance of understanding the wider context in which supposedly neutral digital platforms exist, which shape what is communicated, how and to whom, rung true when I reflected on wider research on technology which suggests that technology developments will inevitably replicate existing power relationships unless they are explicitly used to disrupt power. And the examination of how faith-based actors both provide deep benefit to other members of their faith community but may also act to exclude people of different or no faith, and thus reinforce existing inequities was well made. Each of these forms bring new ways to consider development, but also new awareness as to why we cannot understand any relationship without reflecting on the specific power dynamics that exist and are recreated.

The book finishes by reminding us that *'mutuality and commoning'* structure relationships of support and exchange between peers. These are necessarily flattening structures, which dismantle differences of power and privilege, moving from lines of division (for example via race, class or geography) to lines of support. Although the examples in the book do not exist at a scale to fundamentally shift the social set up it does seem clear that they are important and could become more so as crises become more complex, and governments are increasingly *'unable to cope and unwilling to try'*. The authors emphasise that these initiatives are part of a wider ecosystem that needs to be further engaged with, understood and supported. As I finished reading the book I found myself thinking about whether these disparate initiatives can come together and contribute to reorganising society, to bring about one that is more equitable, inclusive and just. One that could survive the cuts in aid that we are currently experiencing and the rise of populist discourse that is infecting so many across the globe, both of which set people apart rather than bring us together as peers, in solidarity. It cannot be proven from these examples, but it can certainly be hoped for.