

**Anne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman (eds):
Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers.
The Challenges and Futures of Aidland****Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2011, 224 pp., index, \$24.95
(paperback)****Sylvia I. Bergh**

Published online: 15 October 2011

© The Author(s) 2011. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

This edited volume is a very valuable contribution to the emerging field of ‘Aidland’, a term coined by Raymond Apthorpe, whose epilogue here usefully explores the criticisms and lacuna in his own concept. The need for this book is evident: so far, most research on development has focused on the institutions and organizations delivering aid and on the “beneficiaries” receiving aid, while neglecting “the human actors who transform policy into projects” (p. 2). The editors locate the main reason for this scholarly invisibility of aid workers in the fact that their labor has so far been (wrongly) understood as intermediary rather than mediating (citing Latour, p. 4), denying the transformative work of the development worker. The book thus seeks to uncover “the space in which transformation happens and the motivations of a group of often-invisible professionals” (p. 17), thus reintegrating the private and public lives of aid workers, as one inevitably affects the other as well as the development outcomes themselves.

One of the most interesting findings is that the stereotypical aid professional is actually hard to find on the ground—most of the persons interviewed by the authors of this book identify as engineers, educators or missionaries rather than as aid workers. This is partly due to the fact that much of development work “has been reduced to a set of technical problems to be solved by experts” (p. 5) who move in and out of the public and private sectors in both developed and developing countries, and who are seen to be easily replaceable.

The various chapters reflect the vast diversity of “aid workers” and their motivations, and are rich with ethnographic detail and interview excerpts. Sara de Jong’s chapter on altruism and selfishness in NGO work argues convincingly that “rather than attempting to label practices as altruistic or selfish, we need to liberate ourselves of the shackles of this binary and instead critically investigate *under*

Book Review Editor: Silvia Ferreira.

S. I. Bergh (✉)

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam,
The Hague, The Netherlands
e-mail: bergh@iss.nl

which conditions altruism takes place” (p. 37). Thomas Yarrow shows in his case study of Ghanaian NGO workers how personal relations, although frowned upon by proponents of “good governance” as potentially nepotistic and unaccountable, actually were key in upholding the NGOs’ ideological and institutional autonomy in the face of threats from government and donors. Similarly, Keith Brown’s chapter on USAID’s democracy promotion work in Macedonia demonstrates how the personality and commitment of aid workers are shaped by changing national politics as well as organizational structures and procedures.

The editors are uniquely positioned to have taken on the task of editing this book. Anne-Meike Fechter is senior lecturer in anthropology at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, and has previously published on corporate expatriates in Indonesia, while Heather Hindman is assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin and has focused on expatriate employment structures in Nepal. In fact, their joint introduction and their respective chapters are among the strongest in the volume. Fechter’s chapter seeks to provide a typology of aid workers and explores their commonalities and differences in terms of motivations (linking nicely with de Jong’s chapter), mobility and the life course, relations to place and local knowledge, and outlines an agenda for future research on these issues. As such, it should have been framed as the conclusion to the volume, rather than a chapter on equal footing with the other case studies. Hindman’s excellent chapter on subcontracting in Nepal is the only one that speaks directly to another one of the key themes of the book, namely how “development work is being transformed by processes such as deskilling, outsourcing, and neoliberal approaches to staffing” that emphasize efficiency (p. 3), even though the links between such potentially bad employment policies and concrete development outcomes could have been made more explicit by citing examples.

Indeed, a major shortcoming of the book is that while the introduction mentions that “this book calls for an examination of the labor of aid [...] to suggest that the structure of work itself influences the outcomes of development” (p. 2), this is not the main focus of the book, or at least the chapters for the most part fail to make these influences explicit. For example, while Ritu Verma, in her case study on a French development practitioner in Madagascar, does describe the latter’s lived world in much detail, she does not provide the evidence that the women’s projects really failed, nor that, if they did, it was mainly due to a disconnect in the life worlds between the French aid worker and the local beneficiaries, rather than simply due to a flawed project design led by an ill-qualified aid worker. Similarly, while both interesting, it is hard to see the direct relevance of Philip Fountain’s chapter on guesthood in the Mennonite Central Committee’s work in Indonesia, as well as that by Silke Roth on risk and security issues, for the central questions this book poses.

It is also surprising to note the curious quasi-absence of Norman Long’s work on interface analysis which would have seemed an obvious starting point to study “spaces of transformation” and could have served as a unifying lens for the various contributions (it is only mentioned once in the chapter by Ritu Verma).

While not entirely fulfilling its (perhaps too ambitious) missions, this book provides rich and detailed illustrations of Apthorpe’s observation that “different aiders [...] live with different Aidlands [...]” (p. 199) and is suitable for a wide

audience, including students, scholars and practitioners. It also serves as a useful complement for another recently published book, i.e., *Adventures in Aidland: The anthropology of professionals in international development* (edited by David Mosse, Oxford: Berghahn, 2011).

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.