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26 October 2015

The No-Nonsense Guide to International Development: A Review

The No-Nonsense Guide to International Development is written by Oxford International Development professor Maggie Black. She is a consultant for UNICEF, Anti-slavery International and WaterAid, among others. She has written articles about sustainable development for *The Guardian*, *The Economist* and *BBC World Service*. Black is incredibly qualified to make observations and criticisms of how development has hindered, rather than helped, the people who are most effected by poverty and the development of nations.

This book, at first glance, almost seems like a field manual. I thought I would be through the book quickly, but because of the succinctness of Black's writing, *The Guide* ends up being a dense and informative criticism of what the term "development" has come to mean since the end of the second world war.

Essentially, Black uses real-world examples of how companies and nations have tried to "develop" low income and rural areas. She starts in the mountains in Romania, telling about how a Canadian mining company destroyed and polluted a village of 2,000 residents in the name of making Europe's largest gold mine. She moves through similar stories in the Himalayan foothills, Burkina Faso and the streets of Brazil in order to demonstrate her point.

According to the author, the term "development" as we know it today was created by Harry S. Truman after the end of WWII. She argues that, because the U.S. and the West were in such a tense and all-consuming battle of influence with Russia and the east, the model of development is skewed towards developing a certain kind of state, rather than developing the people of these newly founded "third-world" countries.

Black weaves her way through the 60s and the creation of The Peace Corps among other aid groups, and the subsequent tarnishing of the programs; at decade's end, there were more poor people on earth than when it started. Moving into the 70s and 80s, she argues that most of what development has become at the time is more mechanized than anything, and that development cannot be a single machine, or a single recipe.

Into the 90s, aid budgets around the world sank to an all time low since WWII, at an average of 0.25% of GNP. After finishing that narrative, she retells a story of Mohamed Yunus,

an economics professor in Bangladesh. On a walk in a village close to the school, he was shocked to see a woman selling stools making only two cents per stool. After realizing that her economy and what he taught were completely different, he created the Grameen Bank, that offered small loans to the most “unbankable people” in Bangladesh. Ten years after he started the bank, there were more than 1,000 branches and 12,000 employees. She tells similar stories of micro lending developing in India and Ghana. Black argues that this micro-lending is one of the most effective strategies of effective development because it offers people the chance of self-sufficiency.

Black speaks about the ambiguity that now comes from the word “sustainable”, be it ‘environmentally sensitive’ to ‘respect of indigenous ways of doing things’ to affordable over the long term.’ Caution must be used to offer clarity when using ‘sustainable’. In addition, she stresses the importance of customization in each and every local development plan. She insists, “Any community management system of a resource base has to grow organically in response to day-to-day requirements; its success in one setting does not necessarily mean it can be parachuted into a thousand more” (Black 114).

An important distinction that Black makes is not to refer to countries as “first world.” She suggests a binary “have” and “have-not” separated as the North and the South.

Black brings up many of the development resistance movements that have tried to thwart the interest of the North, and stifle their infiltration into their livelihood.

Finally, she asks, “What’s Next?” After years of reinforcing poverty, rather than truly eliminating it, development needs change, and that is the essential question of *The Guide*.

Black suggests: Putting poor people first, reducing the role of international “development” companies, tailoring “development” services to actually assist poor people, and using and testing a multitude of development techniques rather than trying to figure out the “magic bullet.”

I recommend this book for a number of reasons. I learned a lot of context with the development cases in the book. Black does a good job of giving the local’s perspective, which is obviously absent when these development plans were made. The graphics were shocking, but clear and easy to understand, as was her writing style.

I’ve been rambling on. If you’ve made it this far, I applaud you. I would have made this book report shorter, but I didn’t have the time.