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Delivering Development: Lessons from Globalization’s Shoreline

Olumide Abimbola

Edward R. Carr, *Delivering Development: Globalization’s Shoreline and the Road to Sustainable Future*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 260 pp. \$38.00

Edward R. Carr, a geography professor who is also currently a climate change advisor to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has been studying the same Ghanaian villages for the past fourteen years. He brings the understanding of an ethnographic researcher—as reflected in his attention to detail and interaction with the locals as they go about their everyday lives—to the examination of a topic that needs attention from someone with his scholarly credentials. The result is a book that is steeped in local knowledge but that also contributes to the understanding and practice of development on a broader scale.

Using examples from two villages with which the author is quite familiar, the book both illustrates and draws lessons from the conditions in “globalization’s shoreline.” According to Carr, this term refers not to “a boundary between land and sea but the point of connection between people living in communities at the edge of global trade and politics, and the economic, political, and environmental decisions living in other places.”¹¹ These are people who are intermittently affected by global markets and politics—much like the ebb and flow of a tide. But goods and information do not only flow from the wealthiest countries to those who live on globalization’s shoreline, for local people’s decisions concerning the use of environmental resources can impact the whole world. Unfortunately, those who are tasked with “doing something” about development often overlook the fact that they should learn lessons from those whose lives they try to “develop” and bring into the globalized world.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is descriptive and ethnographic. We learn about how one gets to the villages of Ponkrum and Dominase, in Ghana’s central region; about the livelihood of the residents of the villages; that neither has running water or electricity; and that most of the villagers are farmers. The most instructive section, however, is a chapter in which the reader is reminded that what development discourses often present as a natural state of affairs is, in fact, a result of globalization. The standard assumption of development—implicit in the word itself—is of an evolutionary

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journey from the state of nature to the current state of the richest countries in the world.²² Carr shows, through archeological evidence, that this simply is not the case. Both of these villages entered the global economic system in the late nineteenth century, notably through the rise of cash crops and the development of transportation infrastructure.

Their example demonstrates what is true all over the world: villages and communities on globalization's shoreline have often, at some point, been fairly integrated into the global economy, and they have often understood this relationship. In Ponkrum and Dominase, people understood the cash crop economy and the importance of transportation infrastructure. With the rise in logging activities and the construction of roads that led to the villages, villagers were able to earn non-farm-related income deriving from activities related to the new developments. Income from agricultural activities also increased as the transportation network opened up the possibilities of marketing more crops with less transactional cost.

Things changed just after the middle of the twentieth century, when global demand for Ghana's timber fell, contributing to the degradation of transportation infrastructure. This in turn led to the decline of non-farm-related commercial activities; people returned to farming food crops. This shift magnified the impact of declining annual rainfall figures. Throughout ebbing and flowing economic tides, residents made decisions regarding whether or not to stay in the villages. While their decisions illuminate the power structures and the politics of social and gender control in the villages, they also confound what economic theories would predict and what development experts would expect. Carr writes, "Sixty years of trying to make a people—their motivations, and their actions—fit into our beliefs about how people should behave has gotten us nowhere, and it has done tremendous harm."³³

The villagers' understanding of their problems and their experiences of globalization works in their local context form the crux of the book's second half. From detailed ethnography, Carr draws important lessons for the general understanding and practice of development. With the aid of ethnographic data that are presented in the first part of the book, he argues that an improper understanding of the context in which development scholars theorize, and in which development practitioners work, has contributed to the poor performance of development projects. He argues for engagement, but he does not base his argument only on the moral imperative of caring for others. He also argues that the way people along globalization's shoreline interact with their environmental resources has significant effects on the entire world. For instance, tropical forests "absorb roughly eighteen percent of all CO₂ emitted by burning fossil fuels," and almost all the tropical forests in the world are in areas of globalization's shoreline.⁴⁴ If local residents are to consume the forests as rich countries of the world did in the past, one could only imagine what would happen to the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere. In other words, development practitioners could appeal to the selfish interest of rich countries as they advocate engagement. Engagement, however, must be contextually appropriate and participation-based. Before one even begins any engagement, one has to subject the idea of participation to discussion.

Sometimes, participation is just legitimization, especially when the different parties involved in the process have a different understanding of what participation means and when one of the parties has a power to overrule the others. For example, in the late nineties, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank decided that, for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries to be eligible for debt relief, they would have to prepare their own development programs, called Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, in consultation with their citizens. In Zambia, during the process of consultation, multiple ideas for participation emerged. Civil society organizations understood participation to mean engagement in the actual running of development projects, while the local government saw participation as a process that would provide access to much-needed funds from the World Bank, and the World Bank viewed participation as a way for the countries to own their own development plans and programs. To forestall this sort of misunderstanding, Carr advocates negotiation among the parties involved to define participation. The meaning of participation might vary from project to project, meaning that no universal understanding of participation can be assumed.

What about the collection of data and information? Carr suggests that development experts ask the wrong questions. Underlying typical research is the assumption that a more intense integration into the global market economy is the solution to development problems, and that GDP growth brings an improvement in the well-being of a country's citizens. Most existing development indicators have these same assumptions behind them. In a case study example, Carr shows how development data collected with these sorts of assumptions are often interpreted to signify what the interpreter wants, while a more careful reading would show that the data, in and of themselves, mean nothing. As Carr puts it, "The result is an echo chamber of misunderstanding with regard to life and events along globalization's shoreline," because the questions that are asked, and the data that are gathered to answer them, are "detached from the processes and events that really matter on the ground," which, in turn, is due to flawed understanding of globalization and development.⁵⁵

As a corrective measure, Carr advocates building a database of information that includes the challenges of communities on globalization's shoreline and the solutions they have tried, both those that failed and those that succeeded. The existence of this database network would improve the ability of those "at the shoreline" to see the different processes in which they are involved—the larger picture, so to speak—and to learn about solutions that have already been tried in other parts of the world. Projects like this already exist in some regions, where cell phones are being used to source and pass on information about the weather, markets, and so on. All that needs to be done is to scale up and coordinate the effort. The database would eventually be owned and run by the users. Apart from the problem of financing the creation of necessary infrastructure, for which Carr proposes some solutions, he warns that access to the data collected in this fashion does not mean anything if they are interpreted in a way that only confirms biases. In other words, development experts need to learn to study how globalization and development work in specific locations, instead of starting with the assumption that globalization

leads to development and then reading the data as a way to advocate a further push for globalization.

In this important book, Carr urges us to stop devising methodologies that aim to find out whether development projects might work or why they do or do not work without first asking basic questions about the social, cultural, economic, and political situations that have produced the situations that the projects aim to tackle. Instead, we should consider proper understanding of the situation as a prerequisite for any engagement, and proper understanding starts with leaving the echo chamber of development and globalization to question one's assumptions. This is a book that should be required reading for students and scholars of development studies, especially development economists and development practitioners.

Notes

¹ Edward Carr, *Sustainable Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9.

² One other book that shows this is Gilbert Rist's *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (Zed Books, 2002). While Rist's is a theoretical exploration, Carr's work is derived from qualitative engagement.

³ Edward Carr, *Delivering Development: Globalization's Shoreline and the Road to Sustainable Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.