

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Reflexive Practice

Reflexive practice, surprisingly, is still relatively rare among development professionals. Nevertheless, the challenges that new donors – erstwhile aid recipients – are currently posing to international aid’s historical identity, relationships, values and ways of working is an opportune moment to review the past five decades through a reflexive lens. An auto-biographical life history approach permits interrogating the links between the personal and the systemic, enquiring into how and why I understood the world in a certain fashion and what I hid from myself. I encourage my readers to do likewise.

It was a pivotal moment when, towards the end of 2011, three thousand people travelled to Busan, South Korea, to discuss the future of international development assistance. Erstwhile aid recipients had become donors and were challenging the old order. That old order of rich countries financing planned development interventions in poor ones had begun in the latter years of colonial rule; it was well established when, as a PhD student, I first travelled to central Africa in 1967. By then the United States, Canada and the countries of north-west Europe had set up official aid structures; these were complemented by a burgeoning number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), some of whom, like Oxfam and CARE, had originated in providing relief to the victims of the Second World War. The World Bank had already created its soft loan facility for ‘under-developed countries’ and the United Nations was giving birth to an ever-growing number of specialised agencies – the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the United Nations Children’s Fund, and the International Labour Organisation were among those that I was later to become personally acquainted with.

The first twenty five years or so of international development assistance were shaped by the Cold War, during which First and Second World countries used their aid to compete for political and commercial influence in the Third World. In the late 1980s, when the Berlin Wall came down, geographical imaginaries that defined the circulation of money, ideas and people re-divided into North and South rather than East and West. By 2011 a web of organisational relationships had developed, involving governments, both donors and recipients, as well as Southern civil society organisations, multilateral institutions, international NGOs and philanthro-capitalists such as the Gates Foundation. Representatives from all of these, along with development studies institutes like my own, joined the conversation at Busan. There all eyes were on that group of donors which were themselves still aid recipients – such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and China – now challenging the paradigm in which the ‘North’ determined what was development and how it should take place. They offered an alternative in which what they called ‘South-South’ cooperation would call the shots. They distinguished themselves from the ‘traditional’ donors by their identity as developing country governments who knew from firsthand experience what it was like to receive aid from the North. They claimed to enjoy an egalitarian relationship with the governments of the poorer countries in Asia and Africa that they were assisting, based on the principles of mutual self-interest and autonomy.

This they contrasted with the vertical relationship between the old colonial powers and their erstwhile subjects that was based on charity and dependency. ‘South-South cooperation is very friendly. There are no pre-conditions’, said Lu Feng, a Chinese government official interviewed about Busan.¹

Some Northern academics, like Emma Mawdsley,² argued that behind the solidarity language of South-South cooperation, many of the new donors’ practices were similar to those of the old donors whose own aid programmes, like those of the new donors, had always had a strong vein of *realpolitik* self interest. And in the run-up to Busan low-income countries, still heavily dependent on the traditional donors for their health, education and other services, feared that Europe’s governments, hard-pressed to justify their aid budgets at a time of financial austerity, might be using the competition from the South to wriggle out of their commitments. Aid professionals were equally sceptical. One professional, committed to making a better world by supporting changes to power relations in favour of people in poverty, and who was closely involved in the Busan negotiations, emailed me that these new actors in the world of aid were no different from the old ones. Poor people still had no voice -

Within this new global jet set, there are more convergences than divergences. The real issue is that poor and discriminated people’s voice has NOT been enhanced in the process; rather to the contrary: they still GET participated.

Civil society activists in the South, particularly in countries where Chinese influence has been growing, expressed alarm about the deleterious effect of this influence on human rights. And, apart from the more radical sections of civil society, everyone at Busan agreed it was capitalist investment that mattered above all for a country’s development and that aid should play only a minor catalytic role. ‘We were moving towards the end of aid as we know it’, as stated a former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who was well-known for declaring pivotal moments in history.³

Was it not only the end of aid but also of the world as those of my generation had known it? 2011 was the year when people began to wonder whether the severe economic downturn for the North was irreversible. Marco Faroni, Minister for Brazilian development cooperation, drove home that point when he spoke before the Busan conference at my place of work, the Institute of Development Studies. Referring to the economic crisis in Europe, he remarked that some countries in the North were now becoming the new South and that the old South might soon be sending aid to them. He also said that because Brazil had no past, their partners had no pre-conceptions about Brazil’s intentions. ‘Africa looks at Brazil as a cousin who’s doing well’, he said, ignoring the irony that Brazil’s historic links with Africa derive from its past economic dependence on the slave trade and that in Brazil race is still today a significant arbiter of status and privilege.⁴ These remarks may have been political positioning but nevertheless, Faroni’s emphasis on development cooperation as a matter of relationships struck a chord. I had never heard a British development minister reflect on *my* country’s past as shaping our identity in the eyes of aid recipients, nor did I ever hear any one mention relationships and emotions as central to development aid, in the way Faroni had.

I entered the world of development aid in the late 1960s and it took me thirty years to recognize, like Faroni, that relationships and history are central matters for good development practice, a realisation that led to writing this book. Born in Britain to radical parents, founding members of the Movement

for Colonial Freedom,⁵ I never considered how my country's imperialist past might also be part of my personal identity, nor that others might attribute neo-colonial motives to my work as a development practitioner – until one day in 1999 when a friendly Arab diplomat at the United Nations told me so to my face. My commitment to making the world a better place had blinded me to how others might think of me. Two years later, when working in Bolivia for Britain's Department for International Development (DFID), I received the lesson again. 'You may think that we Bolivians see DFID as working for social justice and poverty reduction. I appreciate that's what *you* think and are trying to do', said a Bolivian researcher, Diego Muñoz, 'but *we* know DFID as a donor that for years and years financed rich farmers to exploit the poor.'

I cannot shrug off my country's past. History not only shapes our motives but influences others' perceptions of these. Chinese commentators on development criticise Northern aid for its charitable ethos,⁶ arguing that a better world comes about through the mutual self-interest of investment and trade (a view shared by some Northern critics of aid on the political right). Although some, including me, have struggled for aid to further social justice rather than to serve as a welfare handout, nevertheless in the eyes of others our practice is driven by a moral imperative that might be termed 'charitable'. Altruism alone will not make the world a better place, runs the Chinese argument; framing aid as a gift serves to obscure the relations of power between donor and recipient. Chinese aid relations, they say, are horizontal; ours are vertical. I would reply to the Chinese that power is equally at work in investment and trade relations as it is in aid, but I agree that the moral dimensions of aid from the North are problematic. This is partly because of the vertical power relations associated with non-reciprocated gifts,⁷ but also because of the effect our moral positioning may have on our aid practice, making us feel that *we* know best, disregarding what others might be telling us.

In writing this book, I have drawn on Stanley Cohen's concept of 'states of denial'⁸ – of simultaneously knowing and not knowing. I have learned yet again and more profoundly that not owning up to what I know from what others have told me – and therefore failing to ask myself what I should do about that knowledge – was limited what I could do. I have learnt that working for social justice – in development or any other domain of practice – requires a constant and critical interrogation of my tacit values, patterns of thought and deeply embedded theories of change that I acquired in my early years.

Childhood influences: The dialectics of scrambling eggs

My left-wing working-class parents, largely self-taught, used a variety of intellectual and emotional stratagems to encourage me to learn how change happened. I was ten years old - tall enough to stir with ease the enamel saucepan that my mother fetched down from the shelf above our 'New World' gas stove. First, three tablespoons of milk would have to go into the pan. My mother passed me the bottle with the gold foil cap – the creamiest kind, which she liked in her morning coffee (my father said that in a previous life she must have been a cat...) 'Now the butter', she said, 'not the margarine'. She hated the margarine we had been eating in the austerity years after the War.⁹ Last of all, my mother passed me three eggs. Enough for us two for lunch. I cracked each shell in turn on the saucepan edge to ensure a clean break and poured the egg into the saucepan. 'Don't forget a pinch of salt', she said.

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When I was a younger child, I was allowed only to sit and watch my mother cook – ‘no touching the stove’ – I was endlessly absorbed by the picture on the salt tin of the little boy running to pour salt on the tail of a chicken. ‘See how it runs’. A world of perpetual motion. Now, older, I am myself, the cook. ‘Right’, said my mother. ‘Light the gas and stir briskly’. My wooden spoon swished a golden liquid around in the pan. ‘Now watch carefully. As the liquid warms up, there will be a sudden change. This is the important moment. Carry on stirring, otherwise it will burn. But don’t let it cook too much, otherwise it will dry up’, she said. All of a sudden, my golden liquid turned into fluffy and creamy scrambled eggs. ‘Right, they’re done’, said my mother, taking the saucepan away from me and scooping out the eggs onto two slices of toast. We sat down to lunch at the kitchen table. ‘Did you observe?’ asked my mother, as she chewed her toast, ‘how the butter, milk and eggs were liquid and then suddenly became solid? That is like dialectical materialism. First of all you have a thesis – that is the separate ingredients. Then anti-thesis when they all get stirred up and collide with each other. Then synthesis’ – she lifted a particularly creamy bit of scrambled egg off her toast. ‘Everything has changed. The butter and the milk have gone, and there are scrambled eggs?’

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I learnt that envisioning a changed world required distancing oneself from the present one. I had to problematize the taken for granted. One of my favourite games played with my father was to imagine myself a Martian and from that perspective to describe some everyday object or experience. ‘Now,’ he said, as I climbed onto his lap for a pre-bedtime chat, ‘you are a Martian on the number 38 bus. Describe to me what you see’. My mother particularly liked to imagine with me how things would be once Socialism had been achieved. We had these conversations sitting together at the kitchen table. Above us, hanging from the ceiling on pulleys, was the heavy wooden drier from whose wooden slats wet washing splashed onto the chipped blue Formica table top beneath and plopped into the bowl along with the peas my mother and I were companionably shelling as I asked her to explain how we would do our shopping in a world without money. My parents gave me the conviction that change was possible – should a sufficient number of people take action. Hence the importance of demonstrations and marches, not only to make a statement to the public but also to make a statement to ourselves. As a teenager on the annual four-day march from Aldermaston nuclear weapons depot to London’s Trafalgar Square, I was inspired by the comradeship and sense of collective purpose. When enough of us sang ‘Ban the Bomb for evermore’ it *would* indeed be banned.

Figure 1.3
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Change, however, required not only the ingredients of ideas, values, imagination, enthusiasm and solidarity; it also needed organisation and leadership. I learnt this meant devoting time and energy to process and detail. After my parents left the Communist Party in 1956,¹⁰ my housewife mother switched her attention to making other organisations work well. She became Chair of the local branch of the Labour Party and was also a voluntary worker for the town’s Old People’s Welfare Association, spending several hours a week visiting house-bound elderly people. She soon found the OPWA was not as well organised as she believed it could be, and within a short space of time became its Secretary. Listening to my parents, I learnt that organisational change was not easy – that power and politics came into play. And that other might resist how my parents might think an organisation should be run – whether the Fire Brigades Union, of which my father was the General Secretary, or the local branch of the OPWA. When I was fifteen I experienced such politics when I became Secretary of the Kingston upon Thames branch of the Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

The Young Communist League that I had learnt to love in my early childhood now revealed an ugly face when it used underhand means to force me out of office because I thought the Russian bomb was as evil as the American and British bombs.

What have I revealed so far? That I like cooking, that my parents were Communists and that I learnt from them skills in political organising. My story may have also made evident my interest in theory and my love of ideas, particularly ideas about the nature of change. My absorption with the ‘see how it runs’ message on the Cerebos salt tin may have been a precursor to my current interest in process philosophy that understands the world as a state of unceasing change. I am more interested in the changing relationship between things (and people), such as what occurs in the making of the scrambled eggs, than I am in each of the separate ingredients by themselves. The other bit of theory I have introduced is dialectical materialism. My mother may have been unsure about the theory’s precise details,¹¹ but as I came to understand it my teens, the theory concerned the structural contradictions that generate change which in turn creates new contradictions. There are of course many other ways to explain how temporal change happens. If we should want to intervene purposefully in history – as every development professional does – our favoured explanation will influence what we decide to do. Theories about temporal change are not just a matter of dry academic discussion. Emotions come into it. I often feel just like my scrambled eggs – all stirred up and confused. What do I believe? From early childhood I was aware of contradictory beliefs and alternative realities. This awareness was forced upon me, but I have learnt that it is one of the essential elements of reflexive development practice.

As a child, I read the glossy copies of ‘Soviet Life’ and admired how the workers went out to the ‘virgin lands’ of central Asia and made them fruitful. But my school mates taught me in playground games that the Russians were the baddies. The legacy of this childhood experience is political ambivalence. I have oscillated back and forth on a left/centre pendulum, largely depending on whom I am principally associating with at the time. My answer to whether the railways should be nationalised or run by the private sector has varied at different moments in my life. However, in the world of development practice – for a long time at least – answers to difficult questions seemed simpler. Today, I realise that part of that world’s attraction was it appearing to offer an escape from the contradictions encountered in childhood. Yet, the experience of my Communist childhood when I saw the world one way at home and another way at school has also helped me write this book. Reviewing a collection of reminiscences about similar childhood experiences of a Communist childhood to mine, Marion Glastonbury wrote -

Perhaps after all we would survive our internal contradictions. We might even find that the cognitive dissonance... had been a spur to creativity.¹²

Connecting the personal to the systemic

Learning from an early age that people can hold entirely diametric views about the world – combined with my father encouraging me to think like a visitor from outer space – may have prompted me to study anthropology, a disciplinary training that has had a strong influence on my life as a development professional. Anthropologists use ethnographic methods to collect evidence. Ethnography is about

being a participant observer in the social world the anthropologist is studying. In the last few years, anthropologists have undertaken ethnographies of international aid.¹³ Among them is Nancy Okail, who made herself the central research subject in investigating aid practices in Egypt. When first thinking about the present book, I e-mailed her -

My book is in many ways similar to an oral life history told to the anthropologist, who decides from what she has heard what to include or exclude in her narrative. The difference however is that the self-ethnographer does not have to worry about her power of 'representing' the other. I am the other.

She replied -

But doesn't what we expose or exclude about ourselves have an implication about representing the other?

Appreciating Nancy's argument, I have been selective in what and who I have chosen to write about. As a consequence, I do not portray as full a picture as I would wish as a subject of enquiry into international aid practice. Although my immediate family appear, many of those dear to me are absent from this book. However, I do include some people who challenged my thinking about development and change, and who contributed to turning points in my life. Gaston Eyben, my first husband and André Jeukens, a Belgian businessman, did this when I was an 'aid-wife'. Paulin Hountondji and Robert Chambers – respectively household names in post-colonial and development studies – influenced my early professional years in Africa; and John Roberts, a neo-liberal economist, was a powerful interlocutor during my time as a civil servant in London. Most importantly, Rosario León, whom I met in Bolivia, inspired me to pursue my arguing that the cultivation of relationships rather than the management of money should be the foundation of aid practice.

Reflexive enquiry

The book is also a conversation with my parents – who have long since died – and a reflection about what mindfulness does for those working for social progress. My discussion with them – and a theme that runs through this book – is how the practice of reflexive inquiry can help us do good rather than harm. At the Institute of Development Studies I have sought to encourage such practice, not only among our students but also through 'reading weeks' for staff of international aid agencies. We study and discuss selected texts, exploring themes such as 'power' or 'poverty'. I deliberately choose readings that deepen our awareness of the issues we struggle with every day in our work. I also attempt something else. At the start of the week, I introduce participants to the notion of single- and double-loop inquiry. In single-loop inquiry we involve ourselves directly and fully in experiences, investigating these from as many different perspectives as possible; we pattern our observations into meanings, theories or interpretations as a basis for informed action. Competent professionals do this as a matter of course. A less regular habit is double-loop enquiry, whereby we enquire into the origin of these assumptions or 'pre-suppositions'.¹⁴ What made me who I am, to see the world in a particular way? Double-loop inquiry, like any other skill, gets easier with practice. Sometimes I neglect it because I am too task-focused or in too much of a hurry to stop, think and scrutinise my pre-suppositions. My partner and I often lose our way on country walks when we try to make where we think we are fit with what we see on the map. 'Well, the map indicates a stream and I can't see one, can you? But never mind, it probably dried up in the hot summer and we are definitely on the right path.' In the immediacy of achieving our objective, it is all too easy not to say 'Wait a minute, perhaps we are not where we think we are?'

During those reading weeks, I include something of my personal background in my discussion of development practice. I do this to introduce and encourage another kind of reflexivity - how we understand ourselves and are understood in relation to others, for example how society's notions of gender, race and class shape my identity and how if I do not question this how my behaviour reinforces the social arrangements that sustain inequality and injustice. By speaking about myself I am recognizing that personal life stories influence both what we know and how we choose to act on that knowledge. Thus by connecting the personal to the systemic, I invite participants to mutually explore how history is making them and how they are making history – not separating one's life into different spheres of public and personal, because each impacts upon the other. A notorious (fictitious) 19th Century English do-gooder was Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens' *Bleak House* who organised her lower-class compatriots to go out to Borrioboola-Gha to plant coffee and to civilize the natives. Her passionate concern for what we would now call a development project in Central Africa led to her totally neglecting her children, as well as her own dress and the general management of her household. Mrs. Jellyby is sadly reminiscent of today's ironical self-representation of an aid worker on the blog site "Stuff that Expatriate Aid Workers Like". The aid worker caricatured there sees himself as -

A very important part of world progress. He is *always* needed more elsewhere than he is at home. He has reports to finish, management meetings to attend, networking events to be seen at, other people's children to save. The Expatriate Aid Worker *matters* in the larger scheme of things.¹⁵

I have always been an enthusiastic reader of novels, including fiction of the 19th century, - a period in Europe and the United States when social and economic progress was the ideological norm, even if it involved thousands being made homeless when their dwellings were knocked down to make way for the railway¹⁶ or the natives of Borrioboola-Gha had their land appropriated for a coffee plantation. Fiction certainly influenced why I wanted to do development and how I got to Africa. I have been more muddled and less philosophical and lofty than the reader might infer from my scrambled eggs story. Yet, in telling that story, I did not set out to deceive. My early interest in how change happens is partially true, even though after lunch with my mother I would have gone to my dressing-up box, put on my great-aunt Edie's old red velvet gown and acted out one of my favourite scenes as the wife of an Ambassador, floating regally down a great marble staircase to welcome my distinguished guests. An examined life exposes such contradictions and helps me understand the dilemmas I encountered and the choices I made as an aid practitioner. Fundamental to reflexive practice is the naming and analysis of *power* in the multiple sets of relationships that shape development work. Power is the socialisation process that shapes what we think, say and do. Patterns are created and re-confirmed through habitual and repetitive performance that confirms and reproduces existing structures of power relations. Each performance is based on prior experience as to whether others accepted or rejected what we said or did.¹⁷ Power shapes our identity, values and behaviour. Every time we perform according to the historically derived societal norms that influence our audience's judgement as to whether our performance is acceptable, we re-confirm existing structures, values and beliefs.

I dislike *Bleak House*'s implicit message that women should stay at home and look after their children, rather than meddle in public affairs. However, I *am* interested in how Mrs. Jellyby's

development work was influenced by who she was and how she lived. Dickens refers to this as ‘telescopic philanthropy’ and compares it with the philanthropy of Mr Jarndyce, one of the principal characters in the novel, who quietly undertook good deeds closer to home. I wonder whether Mrs. Jellyby felt she had more opportunity abroad where there would be fewer men of her own class and status to stop her from doing what she wanted. In the language of social theory, she may have had more ‘agency’ as a telescopic philanthropist than as a housewife.¹⁸ Power is about the ability to act and also limits our agency. It both enables social change and sustains the *status quo* through the inequitable structures of gender, race and class that power has produced. Mrs Jellyby partially managed to escape from the gendered power relations that forced her to be a housewife, by exercising her prerogatives of power as a middle class, white person that enabled her to establish Borriobhoola-Gha. I have often behaved like this. In an article in *Gender and Development* Dorine Plantenga argues for the need to question the privileges and the power derived from one’s own identities and to be aware of the pain that one’s interlocutor might be feeling because of his or her relative powerlessness, vital for tackling power relations and processes of exclusion within development practice.¹⁹

A life-history approach

This book offers a re-reading of the historical trajectory of international development aid, its concerns, values, and relationships through the critical lens of my own experience. There is a small, albeit growing, body of ethnographic scholarship about the lives of aid professionals,²⁰ informed by the thesis that individual agency is important in how development aid programmes are conceptualized and implemented. This literature argues that debates about the relevance and effects of aid would be more nuanced and grounded if more were known about the behaviour and motives of aid practitioners, particularly the ‘passionate professionals’ among whom I include myself.²¹ A life-history approach to international aid includes aid practitioners’ awareness of the contradictions in their work, such as that between their life style and that of the people they want to help, an instance of which I describe later in this chapter. However, there is less consideration of reflexive responses to such contradictions in development practice, possibly because the authors are less concerned than I about improving our practice. My Marxist childhood has influenced me to believe there is little point in just studying the world without also wanting to change it.²²

My fellow travellers

A year after starting work on this book, I began to wonder whether others who had spent much of their lives as development practitioners shared my concerns about the politics and psychology of doing good, and whether *their* reflections might deepen or even challenge my analysis. Other people’s life histories might also, I thought, throw light on my own life and help reveal the systemic changes that influenced them as well as me. Accordingly I interviewed four women development practitioners (one American and three British) whom I had come to know during the course of our professional lives. I call them ‘fellow travellers’ because we started in development at much the same time and followed a roughly similar journey.²³ In writing about them I traces genealogies of contemporary aid thinking and practice into the present day, showing how progressive thinking on poverty, gender and participation owed partly to the recognition by women (otherwise privileged by their race or class) that there was more than one way to look at a problem. As I will show in the chapters that follow, each of us was shaped by and contributed to two great emancipatory moments in

the second half of the last century – the end of colonialism and the second wave of feminism.²⁴ Amy, the American, who introduced me to feminist literature, and I were post-graduate students at the University of Manchester and later we met again in Zambia where I was living as a housewife. Catherine and I first met when we were working as United Nations ‘experts’ in the same United Nations project in Sudan. It was also in Sudan that Mary and I first met each other, when she was an NGO volunteer in a refugee programme that my (then) husband’s organisation supported. Lastly, Pamela and I knew each other through our both working in London for the Department for International Development (DFID).²⁵ When I interviewed my fellow travellers they were barely interested in debating how the moral imperative can lead to the construction of development imaginaries. One told me she had been too busy just enjoying her work and suggested that it might be because towards the end of my career I had become an academic that I was concerned with such things. It was an interesting observation and might explain why the teaching profession – self-evidently concerned with learning – has most cultivated the skills of critical reflexion and to do so has used life-history methods, both biographical and auto-biographical.²⁶ It contrasts with development practice, where as far as I know, up to now no such an approach has been taken up, other than in just a few short essays by practitioner colleagues who like me have moved back and forth between academia and practice. This present book seeks to build on the path my colleagues pioneered.²⁷

In educational research and practice, self-study has become a well-developed field derived from the critical reflection of trainee teachers on their evolving practice, using such means as learning journals. Bulloch and Pinner²⁸ provide a set of quality criteria for such self-study. The writing should ring true to readers who are fellow practitioners, while providing sufficient context for those who are not practitioners; it should promote insight and interpretation through presenting nodal moments or turning points that demonstrate the inter-connectedness of the movement of history with the individual life; and the author must be alert to and examine her own prejudices, implicating herself – and potentially the reader – in faults that initially would appear to belong elsewhere, seeking to engage honestly with central issues of her practice. It is against these benchmarks that I invite the reader to judge this book.

The emotional impetus

The impetus for the book derives also from an emotional need to come to grips with what I came to see as my parents’ betrayal of the truth in pursuit of social justice. During the height of the Cold War and until my parents left the Party when I was twelve years old, my elder sister and I had been brought up as firm believers in the Soviet Union. Among the books I inherited after my father’s death is an account by Leon Feuchtwanger of a visit to Moscow made in early 1937 at the time of Stalin’s show trials – the start of a reign of terror. Writing with great enthusiasm about what he has seen, Feuchtwanger admits to some problematical aspects of the atmosphere of ‘conformism’, and in defence quotes Goethe -

Something important always fascinates us, and if we recognise its merits, let us leave well alone what seems to be problematical in it.²⁹

My father wrote an unpublished autobiography. The later sections of his manuscript, dealing with his time as trade union leader, are much less powerful than the account of his childhood rather than reveal. In a separate account to a labour historian about the Communist Party, my father verged on the untruthful.³⁰ There is much that he did not want the reader to know. In his manuscript he only very briefly mentions his membership of the Communist Party and subsequent

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resignation in 1956 following the revelations of Stalin's crimes by his successor, Khrushchev. Then, without further explanation, he writes that Auden's lines written in 1964 continue to haunt him -

More than ever, life-out – there is goodly, miraculous, lovable,
But we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler,
We know that subjectively, all is possible.³¹

This is all he chose to say about his Party membership in his account of his public life. In so doing he deceived his readers about the possibilities and obstacles we collectively construct when seeking to make a better world. The extract from Auden marks the extent to which he was prepared to go in admitting publicly that he had earlier been in a state of denial. Perhaps he felt that to be reflexive in public would undermine fellow activists' commitment to making the world a better place? I believe this is certainly the case with international aid. If we were to tell it like it really is, and then the waning public support would collapse, where would that leave the many millions of people struggling to survive? After all, a lot of what we do *is* good. Unlike Stalin, international aid organisations do not murder people or shut them up in Siberian labour camps. Nevertheless, there are analogies worth pursuing. A state of denial is not just a matter of hypocrisy; it is more serious because much harder to deal with. Not owning up to what we know – and therefore failing to ask ourselves what we should do about that knowledge – is a major obstacle to justice, as I eventually discovered. I think that it impeded my father's genuine commitment to social progress and justice.

Interrogating development work

When living as a young housewife in Zambia in 1970, I visited with my husband a village outside the capital, Lusaka, where a Methodist development worker, Merfyn Temple, was living. I wrote to my sister -

Nobody likes him because he's everybody's bad conscience; he says that civil servants dealing with rural problems of the mass of people shouldn't go and live in big houses and drive expensive cars and divorce themselves from what they're trying to improve. So he lives in a village in a three-roomed mud hut with a corrugated iron roof... He has a wife and three children but they went back to England some years ago. Of course, he's the sort of man that nobody could live with. I'd like to know what his villagers think of him. In his village the people produce more maize and chickens than anywhere else in the region... I'm a little suspicious – perhaps one can't believe that such saintly ascetics exist now? Last year he fasted for days and days to bring the Government's attention to the fact that villages were cut off due to a failure to repair roads.

My query about how 'his villagers' saw Temple may have implied that they, like me, considered him foolish, rather than heroic, to live in poverty here. Saints are uncomfortable people to be here; challenged to ask ourselves whether the way we live matches up to our aspirations.

Figure 1.5

That letter had started with a description of my preparations for a buffet supper I was organising for my husband, who worked for the United Nations, in honour of visitors from head office -

Collapsing in my chair, after spending all day in the kitchen preparing for the party we are giving tomorrow. My *pièce de resistance* – chicken pieces in aspic with a vegetable

decoration of a cock – tomatoes for the crest, carrots for the beak and a black pepper for a beady eye. I think it is quite magnificent... We are expecting to feed 40 people so you can see it's been quite a job – one couldn't contemplate it without a servant to do the endless washing up... But much cheaper than dinner parties. I've budgeted at five shillings per person.

My letter also included a lurid description of our house infested with fleas -

Even the poor baby got bitten – I actually killed several I found on her. Her body is so small that they show up better. But she doesn't seem to have been worried by the bites, although she had a number on her back.

I doubt I would have included this incident if the letter had been to my mother, to whom I tended to write more reassuringly. There were rarely any problems in the fair-weather world represented to her. I was a past mistress at being economical with the truth. I was also good at telling stories in the way I imagined my reader would like to hear them. Thus in the section of the same letter describing the visit to the village outside Lusaka, I write that my baby loved being there, as if it were a scene out of *Gone With the Wind* with the archetypal faithful old black nanny -

I left her in his hut when we went for a walk and came back to find her being rocked by a little old black lady. Normally [she] screams when she sees anybody other than her parents or Kausin [the house servant]. But to this old woman she smiled and smiled.

Interrogating such letters – as well as field journals and professional reports of that period – is a form of reflexive practice that I learned many years after they were written. I can now see how I understood and represented my world at that moment of writing. Drawing on contemporaneous secondary sources, I can fit that into the wider social environment in which I was living. I have asked myself what scope I might have had for seeing and acting differently, and have speculated on what difference this might have made to myself and those with whom I was connected. My anthropology embedded in me a strong reflexive streak, so that as a practitioner and bureaucrat, I can claim that on occasions - as Okely and Calloway put it - 'the anthropologist as a future author is made self-conscious, critical and reflexive about encounter and its possible power relations.'³² Yet my passion for improving the lives of people in far away countries nearly buried the anthropologist as a future reflexive author.

A quick overview of 'development'

While development with a small 'd' connotes progress and growth, 'Development' with a capital 'D' refers to the fifty-year old paradigm of planned interventions in 'developing' countries.³³

International aid is often defined as the flow of concessionary resources from richer to poorer countries. Government agencies in rich countries finance governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in poorer ones. NGOs in rich countries also raise, through voluntary contributions and government grants, money that they pass on to their counterparts in poorer countries. Governments also give aid via multilateral organisations including international finance institutions such as the World Bank and regional banks such as the Asian Development Bank, via the European Commission, and United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme and UN Women. Multilaterals in turn finance recipient-country governments and NGOs.

Aid, however, should not just be thought of in terms of how much money is spent by whom on what. Aid is also about flows of ideas, values and practices within a complex and dynamic nexus of discourses, norms and institutional arrangements encompassing many thousands of separate organisations employing development practitioners.

Phases in the history of international aid can be constructed according to different criteria.³⁴ Two ways of dividing the history of aid are central to this book. The *first* relates the history of aid within the wider history of international economic and political relations since the end of the Second World War and covers the period when most colonial countries gained independence, followed by the impact of the 1970s oil crisis and the resultant global economic recession that led to the indebtedness of many low-income countries in the 1980s. Coinciding with the decline and eventual fall of the Soviet Union – and therefore the end of aid from the Communist bloc - this in turn led to increased dependency on Western donors that has been succeeded by the emergence of a multi-polar world in which erstwhile aid recipients such as China, India and Brazil are becoming major global powers. A *second* way of dividing the history of aid into phases is through the policy ideas that have shaped development co-operation discourse and practice. These can be typified as ‘modernisation’ in the 1960s; ‘basic human needs’ in the 1970s; ‘the Washington Consensus’ of the 1980s, involving a swing from market-oriented policies; the people-centred and poverty-reducing focus of the 1990s; and since then to market-oriented policies along with a framing of development as a also a social justice issue. These broad historical developments shape the book’s chronological, reflexive account of the evolution of my own practice within or attached to development organisations.

Table 1.1.

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Such organisations work in a highly uncertain environment. Operating at the global level, in a world of paradox and surprise, the pressure grows to pass themselves off as infallible and therefore to deprive themselves of the ability to learn. Ironically, whereas reflexivity would appear to be a help in such extreme messiness, it may be very difficult to admit ignorance, to systematically dismantle that un-scrutinised consciousness of being in control. This in turn contributes to states of denial. As I read through my old memoranda and reports from when I was working for DFID, and before that as a consultant and ‘expert’ for the United Nations, I realise how much (so much more than I would have then admitted or even realised) my interpretation of the world in which I found myself was shaped by my job and by those with whom I associated. Just as it still is now, when I am working at the Institute of Development Studies. The difference today is that I want to grapple with this conundrum. I seek the connections between *who* I have become and *how* I explain the international aid system that has shaped who I am and that I also have contributed to. ‘The danger is’, writes Jock Stirrat, ‘that if development practitioners do not reflect on what drives them, what motivates them and the values that they are purveying to the world, they are in danger of producing precisely the opposite of what they are hoping to encourage’,³⁵ which *in the case of this book* is the kind of developmental social justice evoked by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Conclusion

Much of what follows should interest anyone wanting to learn more about reflexive practice and working for greater social justice in their own country, in the ‘North’ as much as the ‘South’. It may challenge people working as ‘national professional officers’ (a United Nations term) to review their experience as local employees of international development organisations and to reflect upon the

quality of their relationships with expatriate colleagues. However, this book is primarily written for those working (or intending to work) *internationally* as development aid professionals, trying to deal with the daily dilemmas of working for the wellbeing of people in countries other than their own. In the chapters that follow I explore how reflexivity can contribute to managing such dilemmas and thus to making a better world. I use the conclusions to these chapters to identify issues and questions that my readers might wish to pursue including in group discussions. From this present chapter I hope that the story of how I first learnt to think about the world will encourage my readers to look at the influence of their own childhood on their development practice and professional aspirations.

There is no agreed definition of ‘reflexivity’. Often used synonymously with ‘critical reflection’ I understand it as a deliberate process of becoming unsettled about what is normal,³⁶ recognising there are concurrent realities and that how I personally understand and act in the world is shaped by the interplay of history, power and relationships. Over almost five decades of involvement in aid, I have learned that reflexivity means being alert to different perspectives, giving such differences the space to show themselves, and in the process of paying them attention, gaining pragmatic clarity about action. As I reflect now on my experience through each of the decades of aid, I find such critical interplays coming to my attention and then winding their ways forward to the present. I begin by remembering my family during the time of Empire and myself as student at the moment when newly independent states embraced development, and there I find the interplay of individual lives and the sweep of history. I move on to my early life in international aid, when a wife in the 1970s, discovering the significance of the interaction of the private and professional. In the 1980s I learnt radical new ideas and then forget them as the organisation I worked for was changing me as much or more than I was changing it. In the 1990s, when as a senior DFID civil servant I was an actor on a global stage, I learnt that how I saw myself was not how others saw me. It was not until the 2000s that my reflexive understandings highlighted the interplay of good relationships, and I realised that this was the basis of the better world I was striving to help bring about. Finally, in the last ten years, I have learnt how to challenge the technical, ‘best practice’ approaches that render invisible development agencies’ power, politics and ideologies. My observation of the world is an interpretation, one step removed from reality. Other people differently positioned may have an alternative reality that I will fail to discover unless I respond to and address the underlying power relations that shape whose knowledge counts, including my own.

The future of international aid will be different from the past and present analysed here. Nevertheless, if the current challenge of Busan and the different approaches to development cooperation that it has signalled can help us to critically reflect on our practices then Busan will truly have been a pivotal moment.

¹ In an interview with Laura Savage, who made an ethnographic study of Busan in collaboration with the author. See Eyben and Savage 2013.

² Mawdsley 2011.

³ On the signing of the 1998 Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, he declared that he could ‘feel the hand of history on our shoulders’.

⁴ Htun 2004.

⁵ Founded in 1954 by British Communists and left-wing members of the Labour Party.

⁶ For example, see Xu 2011.

⁷ Eyben 2006.

⁸ Cohen 2001.

⁹ For an excellent social history of this time, see Kynaston 2010.

¹⁰ Many people left the Communist Party in that year, as a consequence of Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes and the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

¹¹ As eggs do not produce milk or butter, her analogy failed to include an important element of dialectical materialism, namely that the anti-thesis is a product of the thesis which it contradicts. Thus capitalism has produced the working class that will then through struggle eradicate capitalism and produce a new world order.

¹² Glastonbury 1998:15

¹³ The best introduction to 'aid ethnographies' are in three edited collections – Mosse and Lewis 2005, Lewis and Mosse 2006 and Mosse 2011.

¹⁴ See Fook 2010: 40, citing Mezirow.

¹⁵ <http://stuffexpataidworkerslike.com/2011/05/09/54-putting-aid-work-first/>

¹⁶ As in Dicken's *Dombey and Son*. See also Hunt 2004.

¹⁷ See Butler (2003: 421) Performance is 'a repetition that is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already established.' This section also draws on Hayward (200) and Haugaard 2003. For a good introduction to concepts of power in development practice visit www.powercube.net.

¹⁸ See Parker 2003 for an excellent, accessible introduction to social theory.

¹⁹ Plantegna 2004

²⁰ Lewis 2009, Kothari 2006a, Fechter 2012, Fechter and Hindman 2011.

²¹ Fechter 2102.

²² From Marx's Feuerbach Theses: 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.

²³ See also Eyben 2012a.

²⁴ 'First wave' refers to the feminist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that achieved successes such as in many countries where men had the right to vote, so did women; the second wave refers to period from the late 1960s to the 1980s with a resurgence of demands, particularly for equality in economic, cultural and social spheres.

²⁵ The fellow travellers' names are pseudonyms.

²⁶ Goodson 2001.

²⁷ See for example, Scott Villiers 2004, Jassey 2004, McGee 2002, Shutt 2006.

²⁸ Bullough and Pinnegar 2001:14.

²⁹ Feuchtwanger 1937: 173

³⁰ Saville 1992

³¹ This is an extract from 'The Cave of Making'. Earlier in the same poem Auden says, 'The dead we miss are easier to talk to.'

³² Okely and Callaway 1992.

³³ Hart 2001.

³⁴ See de Haan, 2009, particularly Chapter 4 that provides a good overall introduction to the history of aid.

³⁵ Stirrat 2008:421.

³⁶ See Pollner 1991.