

The readings assigned for this paper deal with the subject of “development narratives,” stories that individuals, organizations, and the development community as a whole, tell in order to make sense of the uncertain environment in which development takes place. The articles by Jain and Moore, Roe, and Politt each demonstrate how development narratives can lead individuals and organizations to make the wrong assumptions about the cause of a problem and from this draw irrelevant lessons from the experience. The pieces also presented reasons as to why this cycle of misunderstanding and misinterpretation exists.

The Jain and Moore article discusses the issue of micro-credit as a means to reducing poverty. The wrong assumption being made is that the Grameen model of micro-credit lending can be applied in any community or country, regardless of social/cultural, economic, or political contexts, just as it has been applied in Bangladesh. The conclusion that the blueprint of the Grameen model will result in the success of micro-credit programs (MCPs) is the false lesson learned. In reality, elements of the Grameen model play a much smaller role than they are attributed or are simply not found in successful MCP’s. The purported success of the Grameen model of micro-credit persists because of its popularity among international donors. MCPs competing for funding and support find that applying the favored Grameen model gets their foot in the door with big donors, regardless of how accurately the model will apply to their specific situations.

In one of the four case studies presented in the Roe article, a comparison is made to the “Tragedy of Commons.” In this story, the assumption being made is that overgrazing and overstocking are resulting in desertification of rangelands in Botswana

and that privatization of lands would curb this problem. It was later discovered that there is no correlation between privatization and improved range conditions; rather that government or communal management resulted in better dry-season range conditions. But this lesson is false because in reality, the desertification of rangelands is found to be a result of neither communal nor privatized management but of climatological changes (such as rainfall) and competing land uses. Roe argues that the Tragedy of Commons narrative persists because it stabilizes and underwrites assumptions needed for decision making by providing a model through which project designers can understand what is going on, without embarking on detailed analyses of the situation. There lacks significant negative findings to disprove it, and as well there lacks an equally “straightforward narrative that tells a better story.” It would be necessary to create an equally obvious blueprint to which project designers might adhere before eliminating the currently dominant development narrative of the “Commons.”

The piece by Politt presents a case in which the underlying assumptions being made is that there are eight basic rules for organizational structure and behavior that will result in greater organizational efficiency and an improved public service sector. Because individually, or in various combinations, these eight basic tenets prove successful, it is thought that all eight tenets can be applied simultaneously as guidelines for organizational management (what is called the “New Public Management (NPM).” In this case the “wrong lesson learned” is that this set of guidelines (NPM) is universally applicable to all organizations. The staying power of the NPM narrative rests in the difficulty of disproving its success. Evaluations of organizational reform where the eight tenets of NPM have been applied is difficult because it requires disaggregating NPM and

evaluating the impact of implementing each tenet of NPM separately and requires a large number of personnel to actually perform the evaluation. As well, in situations in which evaluations are done, the NPM narrative is so powerful that one is blind to the actual results. Successes are attributed to NPM without regard to benchmarks against which to measure incremental change and assume all change is a result of NPM implementation, ignoring any pre-existing forces of change. In this case, evaluation results are misinterpreted or altered to fit the desired conclusions and findings.

The second set of readings assigned all address the issues of corruption and clientalism and how these practices impact development. The overarching development narrative states first that clientalism and corruption are more prevalent in developing nations than in developed nations and second that clientalism and corruption inhibit progressive and successful development programs. A number of the articles we read offered a set of generic traits that when present in organizations or development projects make them less vulnerable to such illicit behavior.

The generic traits identified by these pieces can be summed (more or less in these words) as: 1) monitoring and antagonistic surveillance, 2) few opportunities for collaborative exchange, 3) fear of retribution and consequence and 4) trust. The articles by Bunker, Tandler, Wade and Ehrenhardt each provide cases where at least one of these generic traits is present. The Tandler article identifies the importance of accountability and monitoring in structural projects in Bangladesh. Involving local villagers as “community vigilance” can provide the sort of antagonistic surveillance required in the field. Once educated about the particulars of project operation, villagers can serve as whistle blowers on misappropriation and misconduct. The Bunker article highlights how

distance between workers, both physical and social, decreased opportunities for collaborative exchange. Here, lessening interagency dependency was seen as a buffer against corrupt behavior among workers. The Ehrendhart piece addresses the importance of consequence. In the New York Times article, Ehrendhart points out that in the 21st century, journalistic media and bureaucratic check systems create significant fear of public humiliation and legal prosecution. These consequences are enough to discourage current and future political leaders from engaging in or supporting illicit behavior more typical of past U.S. political leadership. Finally, the Wade article focuses on the element of trust, which is defined trust “the belief that an authoritative figure’s use of power will not be predatory or self-interested but will advocate for the welfare of the larger whole.”

Similar to the Tandler piece, Davis discusses the importance of community vigilance in reducing corruption in project design and implementation. However, interestingly, the Davis piece ties together issues of consequence, incentive, and monitoring in this discussion. The Slum Networking Project (SNP) is an example of how increased oversight also increased the “moral cost of corruption.” As well, the establishment of “self-interested monitors” in SNP neighborhoods not only presents a mechanism for the community to express discontent or report misconduct, but it offers staff a sense of pride and accomplishment from a job well done, for the community is just as vocal in its blessings and appreciation. This incentive of pride and recognition adds an interesting twist to the “community vigilance” mechanism in that it not only reduces the opportunity for illicit behavior, but it actually increases the likelihood that staff will perform their duties well. This assurance of improved service to the community can actually be tied to the element of trust in determining program success. In his example of

the management of irrigation systems, Wade suggests that organizational and/or program structure can affect the degree to which actual trust will develop. He identifies clear rules of water delivery, a way to compare actual and expected deliveries, and tying promotional incentives to in-service training as factors that will increase the likelihood of trust-evoking behavior of irrigation staff.

Despite the efforts to reduce or eliminate instances of clientalism and corruption in organizations and development programs, there are situations in which this illicit behavior can reap positive results. The five pieces by Piattoni, Gibson, Nelson, Krishna and Pur all addressed situations in which clientalism and corruption wrought progress and positive change for development programs. The Piattoni piece presents the concept of “virtuous clientalism,” in which a “virtuous patron” may promote progressive economic restructuring in order to gain support and influence at the local level. An interesting detail to Piattoni’s argument is that in some cases, the ability of clients to shop around for alliance with other patrons requires each patron to invest more in the community in order to compete with other political figures. This relationship is similar to the elected representatives (GPs) and traditional leaders (CPs) in the Pur piece on Karnataka and the relationship between the Indian political parties and the non-caste village leadership in the Krishna piece. In both of these situations however, a two-tiered political system is in play where a higher level political body accommodates traditional local politics for the sake of maintaining hegemony, rather than the direct patron (political figure) and client (local citizens) relationship in the case of Southern Italy, presented by Piattoni. The presence of competition is the link between these pieces. In each of these cases there are

multiple political parties or leaders that must compete with each other in vying for public support.

The Gibson and Nelson articles both address situations of clientalism where patrons (political parties and/or individual political leaders) cater to the needs of the client (the public, local communities) in order to win votes. However, what sets these pieces apart from Pur and Krishna is that increasing the breadth of “clients” (regional coalitions, rural poor, working classes, and business elite) results in a broader voter constituents base. Cross class clientalism, in these cases, can result in increased public services, promotion of economic development in communities, and other social benefits for the “clients” while securing support for political parties. In this case, the tenets of traditional clientalism reap benefits not only for the poor, but for other socioeconomic groups as well.

Overall, the readings provided an in depth look into the falseness of prevalent development narratives and the reasons for which they persist in the field. Furthermore, by taking a closer look at the narrative surrounding corruption and clientalism we can see actually how these characteristics, deemed negative and harmful to development works, can actually result in progressive change.