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Oluwatoyin Dare Kolawole ·  
Shirley DeWolf *Editors*

# Development Practice in Eastern and Southern Africa

Lived Experiences from the Trenches

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Editors

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ISBN 978-3-030-91130-0

ISBN 978-3-030-91131-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91131-7>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Preface

With a population estimated to be more than a billion, Africa faces numerous political and socio-economic challenges, extreme poverty and underdevelopment being the most prominent. Its citizens are losing hope on how to improve their socio-political-economic conditions. Development programmes and similar interventions continue to fail to enhance the quality of life of most of its population. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the grave situation. In fact, the pandemic has exposed Africa's weaknesses and lack of investment in key infrastructure, systems and innovations including the development of vaccines and safety net programs to protect society from impact of economic shocks, natural disasters and others. This is despite the continent's long history of vulnerability to extreme climate variability and acute disease burdens such as Ebola and HIV and AIDS. All things considered, the daunting development challenges facing Africa can only be addressed through innovative, inward looking and radical approaches that specifically underscore the continent's contextual and unique socio political economic and cultural landscapes.

The idea behind this book was conceived in 2015 when a small group of academics, development experts and policy makers came together to deliberate on how to document and share their field-based experiences in southern Africa. The discussions on the initiative culminated in a workshop that the Institute of Rural Development (IRD) at the University of Venda in Thohoyandou, South Africa, hosted in April 2019. Thus, this book is a compilation of real-life experiences and lessons that academics and other professionals working on development issues in eastern and southern Africa learnt. It is a rich collection of reflective and reflexive stories that seasoned academics, leaders of institutions and journalists who have shaped Africa's development agenda and direction penned. Specifically, the book was conceived to fulfil two major purposes. First, it is meant to serve as a teaching and learning resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students undergoing training in various development subjects in colleges and universities. Second, the stories in the book are compiled to influence policy development and implementation in southern Africa and beyond. The stories are drawn from the experiences of development practitioners and researchers in Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, Somalia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This means that the array of contributors' viewpoints transcend disciplinary, national and

regional boundaries, which attests to the considerable promise that the book might hold in terms of its relevance and impact on societal transformation.

The book should be regarded as a veritable platform for sharing development practitioners' personal experiences, which are rarely captured in traditional scholarly publications or project reports. Imbued with multidisciplinary perspectives, the stories in the book constitute a rich collection of experiences narrated with real-life illustrations that other development practitioners, researchers and stakeholders will find useful in their own work.

As is the case with similar projects of this nature, realising the objective of this book was fraught with numerous challenges. Securing contributors from eastern and southern African countries was an uphill task. While receiving contributions within set timelines was problematic, ensuring that the individual and overall products were of good quality to include in a standard book proved to be an even bigger challenge.

It is worth restating that development practitioners work in many diverse environments where they coordinate projects, conduct scientific research and are involved in community-engaged work. For the work to be executed effectively, frontline workers should have specialised knowledge, skills, competences, attitudes and values that enable them to shape development agenda and initiatives. Through this book, we have created a platform for sharing lived experiences of the practitioners with those interested in pursuing a career in development-related issues in Africa. Therefore, we are convinced that the book will strengthen practical development practice through building the capacities of young and emerging leaders. Finally, we hope that the book will provide the much-needed ingredients for informed institutional and public policy making.

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**Acknowledgements** The editors wish to thank the authors who contributed to this book project. Special gratitude is extended to the participants in the workshops held in 2015 and 2019 for giving birth to this book. The Institute for Rural Development (IRD), Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa jointly coordinated the development of the book.

# Introduction

## Background

The complexity of socio-economic challenges witnessed in contemporary societies necessitates the adoption of multifaceted approaches anchored on a sound understanding of local systems and their related dynamics. While the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and Africa Union Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2019) provide the frameworks for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all, the instruments may not fully realise their goals if they are not adequately linked to tangible programmes on the ground.

Development is holistic in nature, and it transcends scope that goes beyond mere economic growth. Indeed, the concept is very complex, and its meaning is subject to how individuals view or perceive it. Its various dimensions can only be thoroughly comprehended within the context of people's yearnings and aspirations. The complexity of the subject warrants the need for those working in the field to acquire sound expertise and analytical tools for understanding the workings and machinations of any social systems and their dynamics. While theorising development may be necessary to help shape experts' thinking on the subject, it is not in any way sufficient on its own. Both theory and praxis should complement each other to achieve human growth and development. The rate at which alterations now occur in all spheres (including governance, political economy, climate and public health, among others) at both local and international scales is a testament to the fluidity and complexity of development itself. Put differently, the plethora of development challenges, which currently confronts humanity, is an avenue for pessimism (Chambers, 2005). Nonetheless, optimism must transcend pessimism only if development actors are determined to not allow the situation to go from bad to worse. If the actors become too pessimistic and allow persistent challenges that confront them on a daily basis to blur their visions, the situation can worsen to the extent of becoming *laissez faire* in their dispositions towards bringing about "good" change. To combat complacency from becoming too entrenched, a mixture of pessimism and optimism is needed. Borrowing from the Sachs' (1992) pessimism and Thuveassons' (1995)

optimism about development, Chambers' (2005: p. 186) rejoinder affirms that "[a] balanced view has to recognise renewals and continuities in the landscape as well as ruins and rubble, and other trees as well as new sprouts only if we are to achieve success in the business". To consistently dwell on the failures and errors associated with development and overlook, the progress made is to invite the actor to be overly complacent and do nothing to face the challenge headlong.

Understanding how to address wicked problems goes beyond the traditional approach commonly used in development practice. This calls for going the extra mile to understand the rules of engagement and ensuring that they are properly applied in real-life situations. Ultimately, the overarching goal is to collaborate to achieve human progress in its many facets. Development is meaningful when it results in positive change in society and enhances people's lives, assets and capabilities. The multidimensional nature of development thus warrants viewing the concept through an eclectic approach, which makes it possible to fully understand issues to address (Kolawole, 2010). As Seers (1969) observes, development cannot occur within any context if the problems of unemployment, inequality and poverty remain inadequately addressed. Many more intertwining issues hamper development efforts. They include conflicts, climate change, famine, disease outbreaks, bad leadership, poor governance and corporate irresponsibility, among others.

The right and access to food, health services, education and water partly constitute the bedrock of sustainable development which is anchored on the idea that current human needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is worth acknowledging that African countries have made some progress towards addressing the multiple challenges that the continent faces. However, sustainable solutions remain elusive due to a myriad of issues that are mainly associated with the deficit in Africa's polity and governance. Among others, accountability and transparency, transformative leadership, commitment to long-term planning, adoption and implementation of goal-oriented approaches that consolidate the efforts and resources of multiple sectors are required to successfully achieve sustainable development on the continent. One major avenue through which this goal can be attained is the creation of the platforms for development practitioners and academics to share and deliberate on their experiences. Ultimately, such intellectual engagements and thought leadership must inform processes, programmes and policies designed to yield sustained and sustainable solutions to the multiple challenges constituting a barrier to the continent's ability to improve the livelihoods and well-being of its citizens. This book is one such strategy because it has the potential to close the gap.

This book is a product of rigorous debates among academics and development practitioners on how rural and urban development practice can be likened to a war in which the "fighters" wage battles and wars from the "trenches". It thus serves as a platform for sharing the failures and successes witnessed during the time development practitioners spent in the trenches.



## Book Structure

This book is the first edition of a compilation of stories that emanated from academics and professionals working within the context of development practice in eastern and southern Africa. *Development Practice in Eastern and Southern Africa* is partitioned into four sections with diverse shared experiences that need to be conveyed to its readership.

Following this introductory chapter, Part I is devoted to the lived experiences drawn from development-oriented research in eastern and southern Africa. The chapters in this section outline how development researchers navigated multiple realities, challenges and opportunities including lessons learnt in the field. The experiences drawn from the Okavango Delta of Botswana and some parts of South Africa and Zimbabwe come to bear in this section.

Personal stories and experiences from community development practice are presented in Part II. Authors narrate and reflect on their involvement in development programmes that supported small-scale farmers. Reflections on crossborder issues add unique flavour to the collection of contributions.

Part III outlines the dynamics associated with culture, skills development, gender issues and science communication in development practice. Authors' accounts from field research and development endeavours provide interesting and rich resources. This section also lays bare some intriguing socio-cultural issues on gender and power dynamics in rural communities.

Part IV is rich in individuals' "lived" experiences that relate to career progression in rural development programmes. Among them are the stories that highlight the importance of mentorship, integrity, humility, team and hardwork in successful navigation of career paths within development programming.

The concluding section of this first volume is a synthesis that distils cross-cutting issues in the narratives. Authors' challenges and opportunities from development practice are discussed within the context of key policy issues that might provide a roadmap for enhancing development work, especially in eastern and southern Africa.

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**Part I**  
**Navigating Research in Development**  
**Practices**



# Chapter 1

## Navigating Multiple Identities and Vulnerabilities when Conducting Fieldwork



Petronella Chaminuka

### Introduction

During the last 25 years, I have worked on several community projects in remote areas that have compelled me to adopt multiple identities. Outside the field, I engaged fully with my international project partners as a researcher on ‘equal grounds’. However, during field visits in South Africa, where I have carried out most of my professional work, I have often found myself assuming the roles of a researcher, research subject, advocate, protector and in some instances, a sacrificial lamb. In this chapter, I present, some of my experiences in my journey of developmental practice.

### Navigating Culture Dynamics

As part of the process of community entry to introduce a project, it is common for researchers to appear before one or more traditional/community leaders, who in most instances are male. As is customary in some places, women must dress in an appropriate way, which often includes having to cover one’s shoulders and hair.

On two occasions, I was part of an international research team that introduced a project to traditional leaders in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Our research team comprised both male and female local and international researchers. During field trips, my professional portrayal from locals differed from that of my fellow female, white Global north researchers. Twice, I was denied entry into meetings without putting on head gear and a scarf to cover my shoulders. What was puzzling for me was that European female researchers in the team did not have to comply with this requirement for them to be allowed to participate in the meetings. Both times,

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sympathetic ladies working in the offices of traditional leaders came to my rescue by lending me their own head gear and scarfs.

During one meeting, we were informed that women had to kneel when greeting traditional leaders. Although the host did not necessarily assert this, my upbringing and familiarity with this tradition could not allow me to remain seated when greeting elders. During most engagements with the traditional leaders, I frequently alternated my personality between that of a researcher and a culturally sensitive and meek African girl child.

A key principle when conducting research in rural areas is having a listening and learning mindset and not having a “know it all attitude”. Assuming a curious disposition is advisable, which entails always asking so that the locals tell their story without any bias. I was raised in rural areas and have a solid understanding of life in these setups. Quite often, I cringed at some of the questions that my European co-researchers asked when we conducted research in the field.

One day, I found myself listening patiently to my colleague quizzing a young woman. She was asking her why she carried a bucket of water on her head. The inquiry was about the level of discomfort associated with that, in addition to wanting to know whether the bucket would not fall and how she had learnt the art. Seeing the puzzled look on the face of the young woman being quizzed, I had to whisper to my colleague that I would provide answers at a later stage. Here I was volunteering myself as a research subject. This incident and several others later helped me understand why Global north researchers in our group who had spent so much time in the field collected much less data compared to their African counterparts. A huge gulf in understanding and conducting community-based research existed between African and Global north researchers. In fact, we often joked later with other African researchers about how our counterparts weaved their way through seemingly impressive stories on livelihoods in rural Africa based on just a few photos and information that were in most instances obvious to us.

Another experience of note was when I embarked on my PhD studies. Our project coordinator told us that one major skill he developed during his fieldwork experience was the art of ‘waiting’. In rural areas, it is common for meetings to start several hours later than scheduled times. Locals who usually come early sometimes do not mind waiting until engagements start. After years of fieldwork experience and mastering a better understanding of the local context, one does not get surprised or irritated by the long delays. However, within the context of travelling with international partners, there is the underlying pressure to defend the delays. In some cases, we even apologise for such delays to our non-African research partners. Another view I have come across over the years is the notion that people come to meetings because food is provided. Some researchers even still believe that providing snacks or lunch after community meetings or workshops is unethical and might influence the participants’ viewpoints. If this is the view, is it not ironic that we rarely hold meetings in our offices without coffee or lunch being served? Having shared all this, let me shift to specifically focus on the following: household surveys for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)/AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) studies; safety concerns and doing household surveys the “appropriate way”.