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LESSONS LEARNED? DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES IN THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD

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THE post-World-War-II period has typically been seen as the beginning of the 'development era'. As global power relations shifted and nationalist and international pressure to liberalize and end colonial rule mounted, the colonial powers sought to revise their rationales for the legitimacy of the colonial endeavor. Longstanding dichotomies such as metropole/colony and civilized/primitive were reworked into the categories of developed/underdeveloped. The scale and intensity of development interventions increased dramatically, and a language of planned development, undergirded by 'science', came to frame the policy debates of colonial administrators and the technical experts they relied on, as well as nationalists and local elites. But development had been a central feature of encounters between the West and Africa since at least the early twentieth century, so that by the 1950s, all parties involved in the encounter had substantial experience of its policies and practices. Using detailed ethnohistorical and archival data, the papers in this special issue examine development programs in the late colonial period from across the continent in order to analyze how such historical experiences contributed to the conceptualization, implementation and outcomes of these programs.

These papers, like much recent research on development, explore development discourses and the ways in which experts and government officials defined particular development problems and conceptualized solutions.[1] But in examining particular development programs across Africa, these papers seek to bring development practice into the analysis of development discourse.[2] Rather than situating persistence and change in development discourses largely within dominant international and government institutions, these papers argue that such discourses were inevitably intertwined with development practice. In considering the local configurations within which experts and officials sought to implement their ambitious master

[1] See, for example, Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, 1995); James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, 1994 [1990]); Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London, 1992). For a critique of this approach, see: Arun Agrawal, 'Poststructuralist approaches to development: some critical reflections', *Peace and Change*, 21 (1996), 464–77.

[2] See the introduction in Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (eds), *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1997), in which the editors (p. 18) note the importance of considering the role of practice in shaping development theory.

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plans, these papers show that few if any plans remained uninfluenced by local struggles over land, labor or agricultural and environmental expertise. Neither hegemonic nor unchanging, late colonial development agendas were in fact rooted in the experiences of earlier colonial efforts to manage rural livelihoods and tied to both the global changes and local realities of the late colonial era.

In linking development practices and discourses, these papers explore a number of questions. What were the key themes, tropes and issues of late colonial development agendas? What lessons had government officials, development experts, and African men and women learned from earlier development efforts? How did these lessons shape the negotiations and contestations between the various participants? How were these lessons mediated by the cultural, political and economic context of the late colonial period?

In their paper, James Fairhead and Melissa Leach use case material from the Republic of Guinea to explore the changing ways scientists, administrators and local populations interacted, leading to the uneven rise but eventual dominance of desiccation science (and therefore anti-desiccation interventions) in late colonial development agendas. In the context of decolonization, resistance by local farmers to vigorous colonial interventions sparked nationalist sympathies and briefly challenged desiccationist policies. As Dorothy Hodgson reveals in her analysis of the Masai Development Plan (MDP), the intensity and insensitivity of British colonial interventions in Tanganyika in the 1950s provoked similar responses. In the context of failed promises of development and anxieties over government betrayals, the MDP intensified the struggle between and among Maasai and colonial administrators over land, labor, livestock and Maasai livelihoods. Despite its claims to address merely technical problems, the MDP was, as Hodgson demonstrates, deeply intertwined with colonial imperatives to order, control and compel the progress of their most backward subjects.

In contrast to such overbearing assertions of colonial power with little regard for local knowledge, Monica van Beusekom's paper explores how the development policies and practices of the 1940s and 1950s at the Office du Niger irrigation scheme in French Soudan (Mali) emerged from the encounters between colonial agricultural officials and African farmers during the 1930s over crop selection, labor allocation and land use. Failing to effect the grand transformations of African agricultural practices they initially envisioned, colonial administrators eventually modified project objectives to incorporate local knowledge and local agricultural practice.

Finally, Eric Worby's paper explores the circulation and experience of changing development agendas in Southern Rhodesia through the comparison of two African reserves, Sanyati and Gokwe, both located in the relatively remote northwest and each drawn into government development efforts at different times. Farmers who were forcibly resettled at Sanyati in the 1950s bore the full brunt of the coercive resource management policies of the Land Husbandry Act. In contrast, immigrant farmers at Gokwe, whose earlier development experiences had imbued them with a modernizing ethos, encountered a community development strategy designed in the 1960s as a response to the nationalist fervor produced by earlier approaches. Worby's analysis of these cases demonstrates how timing, sequences and

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spatial marginality played a determining role in the perceived failure of Sanyati and success of Gokwe.

Together, these papers demonstrate that for most Africans, the concerns of late colonial development programs were not new. Agendas central to postwar development – whether they were the dangers of desiccation in Guinea, the virtues of intensive plow agriculture in Southern Rhodesia or French Soudan, or the imperatives of rational pastoralism in Tanganyika – were conceived, tested and contested well before the postwar era. In Guinea, rural people had objected to the creation of forest reserves in the 1930s, only to face a major wave of forest reservation in the late 1940s and 1950s as fears of desiccation came to dominate the administration's agenda for development. In Southern Rhodesia, the majority of the immigrants who came to cultivate cotton under government supervision in Gokwe in the 1960s originated in the areas of the colony where the Native Agriculture Department had pursued heavy-handed policies of centralization and conservation in the previous three decades. In Tanganyika in the 1950s, Maasai subject to the Masai Development Plan's efforts to built permanent water supplies and clear tsetse-infested bush had seen such efforts before and had, in fact, welcomed some interventions such as water projects, medical and veterinary services, and schools. In French Soudan, the Office du Niger irrigation scheme had, since the 1920s, demanded that farmers under its supervision adopt intensive plow agriculture.

Instead, what was novel about post-war colonialism was the heightened scale and intensity of colonial development programs. Increased sources of funding for development made available primarily by Great Britain's Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940) and France's Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social (1946) gave governments new power to push their development agendas. Both the CDW and FIDES differed from previous metropolitan investments in Africa in the much larger sums approved and the greater emphasis on grants rather than loans. A related development was the new found belief in the organizational and administrative abilities of bureaucracies to manage such large projects; the days of itinerant district officers haphazardly implementing small projects was long gone. Scientific and technical expertise was harnessed to the colonial mission through the enlargement or creation of government departments to address areas such as water, agriculture, forestry and veterinary affairs. The distinct duties and knowledge of administrators and technical experts were brought together through the formation of committees and the language and procedures of planning.

A firmly entrenched evolutionary perspective guided the modernization plans of the newly empowered government services. This unilineal model of development anticipated change not only in farming or herding methods, but in culture – in such areas as gender relations, family structure and identity – resulting in more elaborate and incisive attempts to reshape African livelihoods. Political liberalization and the gradual enfranchisement of colonial populations during this period led colonial governments to reconceptualize their ethnic subjects as national citizens. But at the same time that governments purported to transcend ethnicity, they continued to perpetuate essentialist notions of it by blaming setbacks in development on culture. Ongoing struggles over land, labor, markets and political representation

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therefore took on new resonance as Africans and colonizers struggled among and between themselves over definitions of modernity, progress and development.

Central to these debates were the divergent historical experiences of development of colonial administrators and Africans. Colonial officials, who moved from post to post every few years, rarely stayed in one place long enough to understand the layered history of its interactions with the colonial state. Even when they did, their universalizing, evolutionist perspective saw more value in equating African experiences with past European ones. One consequence of this relative lack of interest in the particular historical experiences of Africans was that officials could more easily attribute the causes of development problems to the inadequate scientific knowledge of Africans rather than to history, enabling technical fixes that obscured the political dimensions of the problems. In contrast, the responses of rural Africans to the intensified development interventions of the late colonial period drew on their long historical knowledge of the promises and pitfalls of development. History rather than a universalizing science informed their actions and shaped the content and form of their protests, demands or acquiescence.

The cases, of course, show considerable variation as to whether memories of past development interventions became 'lessons learned' or were ignored and forgotten by all involved. Maasai, who had earlier heard the government justify land alienation as necessary for improvement, approached the Masai Development Plan with the deep suspicion that development would bring further land alienation. In Southern Rhodesia, immigrants' prior experience with plow agriculture proved to be an advantage on the Gokwe cotton-growing scheme. At the same time, the willingness of the scheme's staff to re-evaluate earlier coercive extension methods led to an approach that assumed farmers' economic rationality and ability to respond to the incentives of profit. Office du Niger managers recognized some of their earlier failures and turned to farmers when they needed to understand the characteristics of soils at the scheme. Yet at the same time other lessons were conveniently forgotten or ignored. In Guinea, desiccationist anxieties became entrenched, leading to comprehensive forest reservation programs in spite of opposition from farmers in the 1930s and the late 1950s.

Considering the impact of earlier development experiences for late colonial development leads us to the larger question of how development approaches emerge, persist and change. To explain why some development agendas were ascendant, while others failed to gain wide currency and why some ideas and practices endured in spite of repeated failure, the authors turn to the at times competing and at times converging interests of a wide range of actors, African as well as European. Several of the papers point to the ability of distant administrators in colonial or metropolitan capitals to imagine grand transformations and to construct visionary models, while district-level officials struggled with the practical day-to-day negotiations needed to institute programs. Theories of desiccation (in the case of Guinea) or of the carrying capacity of land (in the case of Southern Rhodesia) could prove impracticable when the conflicting interests of the agricultural service or the political imperative of moving Africans out of white settler areas had to be taken into account. If practical concerns and negotiations with the

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target population led to modifications in the implementation of visionary models, as theory, these visionary models appear to have largely survived such challenges. In French Soudan, practical consideration of farmer expertise by extension staff did not bring an end to the social evolutionism of French agronomists who ranked African farming systems as inferior to European ones. Although the significance and consequences of the interplay of these forces varied from case to case, as a group the cases demonstrate that change and persistence in development ideas cannot be divorced from the locally-specific configurations of power at the time.

In particular, late colonial development was closely tied to colonial government's efforts to control and discipline their subjects at a time when the very legitimacy of colonialism was in question. As such, development itself became a key issue for nationalists struggling to end colonial rule. The timing of these projects, and the changing nature of the colonial state, are therefore central to understanding the parameters and preoccupations of the development agendas at the time. In fact, it is precisely because of the subsequent transformation of development from a colonial to a nationalist project that the late colonial period is crucial for understanding contemporary development practices and debates.

If some of the most influential recent literature on development has focused on dissecting development discourse emanating from international institutions and Western governments, these papers highlight the importance of problematizing the relationship between the discourses and practice of development. Development practice may diverge from official discourse, may be shaped by local struggles and may inform and redefine official discourse. Such disjunctures can only be discovered, however, by extended ethnographic and/or historical research that explores the role of local knowledge and knowledge of the local in tempering master plans. In so doing, these papers throw new light on the nature of colonial power and the agency of the colonized.

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