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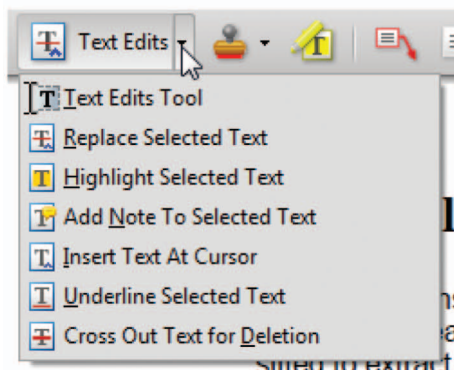
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Fellow Travellers in Development

ROSALIND EYBEN

ABSTRACT Although what has been called ‘the people-centred development decade’ of international aid in the 1990s can be explained at the systemic level by the end of the Cold War, such an account does not tell us how it actually came about. This article argues that a contributory factor can be identified through the life-histories of a generation of development semi-professionals, women now in their sixties who were caught up and part of two great emancipatory moments in the second half of the 20 century: freedom from colonialism and women’s liberation. These shaped their consciousness and produced political effects that gave them the opportunity to influence development practice. That they were able to make use of that opportunity is attributed to their versatility and entrepreneurship, developed through a force of circumstance that had given them an education but denied them the traditional career path taken by their male peers.

This article is about five women including myself—four British and one American—all now in their sixties, who first travelled to live in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s/early 1970s and have since then spent most of their relational and professional lives in development practice. Amy, Carol, Mary and Pamela¹ are my ‘fellow travellers’ because each has been a companion at one time or another on my own professional journey. They are also fellow travellers because each is ‘someone who does not accept all your aims but has enough in common with you to accompany you in a comradely fashion part of the way’.² In other words, they did not necessarily view themselves as signed up development professionals but rather saw their development practice—particularly in the first 20 or so years of their working lives—as something that occurred through happenstance; even when doing it, they may have defined it as something else. At the same time they were passionately interested and involved in what they did and loved their work. By the late 1980s early 1990s they were among a cohort of people who influenced how development agencies recognised and addressed issues of participation, gender equality and poverty reduction. This paper’s premise is that the life-histories of these women help us understand better how such a shift in development practice and policies occurred.³

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Two globally significant historical moments shaped their employment opportunities and thus what they were able to achieve. The first is the coincidence of their arriving in Africa in the early years of 'international development', shortly after most countries had won independence from colonial rule and at a moment when, as Kothari comments, 'ideologies that were constructed and used to sustain forms of colonial rule and authority ... travelled into the spatiality and temporality of international development cooperation and aid'.⁴ They were young when international development was young and today they are retiring when the postcolonial paradigm of development aid established in the 1960s is also on the way out.⁵ The subjects of this article varied in the extent and manner they became incorporated into that paradigm. Resistance and acceptance occurred for them at different moments. Possibly because none saw themselves on a formal career ladder—or a 'life-plan' as Carol put it—they were able to keep some distance from mainstream development orthodoxy, including such 'colonial legacies as established and traduced attitudes towards, and imaginations of, the Other'.⁶ They became experienced and pragmatic practitioners of a less objectifying and more participatory approach to development, concerned with understanding and responding to local realities.

That these women led active and fulfilled professional lives, without ever having 'careers', is because of the age they had already reached by the time the other significant historical moment unfolded in the 1970s and 1980s: second wave feminism. With the transition from colonialism to development in the 1960s many of the younger—nearly always white and male—former colonial officers found work in the new international organisations and aid agencies created in that decade. Over time the still rapidly expanding jobs market of international development practice became more inclusive,⁷ recruiting professional men from elsewhere in the world, including the former colonies, and more gradually opening these jobs up to women. When our group of women first arrived in Africa, such changes were not yet observable. Other than as volunteers or in gender-segregated jobs such as nursing or home economics, female internationally recruited development professionals were extremely rare.

In the UK, North America and elsewhere in the developed world women graduates just a few years older than the subjects of this article had conformed to one of two possible life choices: a minority stayed single and worked as professionals, while the majority followed the mainstream norm of getting married soon after leaving university. After raising a family they rarely managed to do anything other than voluntary or part-time work. Indeed, in the UK a greater proportion of women among those who were children in the 1950s were to follow this pattern than did the smaller number of graduates born a couple of decades earlier.⁸ Only a very few even aspired—not necessarily successfully—to combine a profession with marriage and a family. Overall the same pattern persisted in the case of women graduating in the 1960s but beneath the surface something was simmering— aspirations were brewing. When the second wave of feminism arrived in the 1970s many of these already married young women were ready and waiting for the changes it offered.⁹

The changes to gender relations back home took some time, however, to have an impact on expatriate lifestyles, where there persisted the notion inherited from colonial times of the expatriate nuclear family travelling from posting to posting in furtherance of the husband's career. It was not just the diplomatic wives who 'were caught in a time warp'.¹⁰ For example, it was only in the late 1980s, more than 10 years after the UK Sex Equality Act, that the UK aid ministry commissioned a review to determine why there were so few women Technical Co-operation Officers (TCOs). The reviewer found the terms and conditions of TCO employment reflected a state of affairs whereby a TCO was naturally a man with a dependent wife, thus excluding or deterring women applicants. Women accompanying their husbands as dependent spouses found that social norms and legal barriers prevented them from seeking employment in the countries to which their husbands had been posted.¹¹ It is only in the early 1990s that we begin to see any real increase in numbers of women hired as development professionals.¹²

In the context of these two interconnected historical moments I look at how the five women who are the subjects of this article became development practitioners. I trace how these women have been involved in the development sector as volunteers, spouses, consultants, project 'experts', teachers and bureaucrats, with one or more of these roles assumed at any time in response to the constraints and opportunities encountered. How and why they chose what to do, both in their personal lives and as development workers—a distinction at times hard for them to disentangle—was shaped by the evolution of the international development paradigm and by the effects and opportunities brought by second wave feminism. They used the disadvantage of their gender-based enforced marginality to explore, think and act differently from the mainstream development professionals of their generation. 'Marginalisation contributes to an understanding of multiple realities. It is these experiences and the skills that develop in response to them that can lead to the creation of new possibilities and new analyses'.¹³ It was no coincidence that the shift which occurred in development agencies' thinking and practice in the 1990s happened just when these women and, thanks to the gains secured by the feminist movement, others like them were able to achieve professional recognition and move into positions of authority previously denied them. As Pamela put it, 'We were smart enough to use our life experience to get ourselves proper jobs'.

The material for this article was originally gathered for a book I am writing about the dangers of trying to do good. International development practice is an interesting field to explore because development has often been seen as a 'project of hope guided by the aspiration for greater social justice and emancipation of the poor and disadvantaged in the world'.¹⁴ Making a better world was how I explained to myself what I wanted to do when in 1962 I chose to study anthropology, because I saw it as 'useful'. However, it was more through circumstance than careful career choice that eventually I became a development practitioner—just as with the other women in this study. Nevertheless, although I fell into development practice by happenstance, once there, my belief that I was helping to make things better was

140 important to me. A year after starting work on my book I began to wonder
whether women with similar work interests to mine also shared my concerns
about the politics and psychology of doing good. I decided to embark on a
series of conversations to discover whether their reflections might deepen or
145 even challenge my analysis. However, I found my interlocutors less concerned
with debating the perils of doing good—their conversations revealed a
commitment to helping improve people’s lives and feeling that they had been
useful in that regard—and more interested in reflecting on their involvement
in development. Thus, I took another look at my material, this time focusing
150 on *them* (but including *me*) and found that their life-stories cast an interesting
light on the history of international development practice. It is from this
Documents of Life perspective that the present article is written¹⁵—a
perspective that is also a reflexive response to Amy’s and my shared
postgraduate education, in which C Wright Mills’ argument that sociology is
155 the interplay of biography and history had a formative influence.¹⁶

Setting the scene

I had first met Amy when we studied anthropology in the UK in the mid-
1960s.¹⁷

160 Amy did her doctoral fieldwork in Zambia, where she met a local man and
settled down in Lusaka. I did my fieldwork in Burundi, where I also met my
husband, a former colonial official in the Belgian Congo and in his first
posting with the World Food Programme.¹⁸ When he was transferred to
Zambia and I joined him there, Amy and I renewed our friendship. When I
165 emailed her in 2009 we had not been in contact for nearly 40 years.

Dear Amy,

170 I am writing this email while struggling to pick up the threads of a book project
that seeks to employ a reflexive anthropological approach to writing about
development and its historical context and to do this through my autobio-
graphy ... This includes digging into my own memories—and in so doing
reading my letters to my mother from Lusaka that she faithfully kept. Your
name appears regularly in these although I fudged the story of when exactly
175 Gaston and I got married (you may recollect you were one of our two
witnesses, the other being the Belgian Chargé d’Affaires).

So, I did a Google search and I find you are in Sweden. And I also discover that
Ben is in Ireland, where actually also lives my only child, Karin, born in Lusaka
six months after your Joy. Gaston lives with his third wife in India and to round
things off about relationships and locations, I am sending this email from the
180 coast of Chile where I spend a few weeks every (European) winter on a mini-
writing sabbatical in the house of my Israeli-American partner who acquired it
when working here on agrarian reform during the time of Allende and whom I
met when working for FAO [the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation] in
Madagascar in the mid 1980s.

185 You played a formative role in my life—when we were students in the UK you
introduced me to feminist literature (Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir)

and in Lusaka kept me intellectually curious in what with hindsight was a peculiarly dreary and boring time for me.

I would be delighted if you were interested in reviving our acquaintance—and more especially I wonder if you would be interested in our meeting again? There is a possibility that I might be in Lund between 11–13 March and if so would you be available and interested in our meeting for about a two–three hour structured dialogue (that I would tape record and afterwards send the transcript to you) about our own experiential and intellectual journey in relation to ‘development’ since we last met?

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Dear Rosalind

I’ve thought about you often . . . I moved to the Balkans in October, combination of formal retirement and Ulf’s increasingly strident complaints of being abandoned. We expect to be here until August 2010. Ulf is the counsellor for development cooperation at the Swedish Embassy. We met in Botswana in 1976. Our son Anders is looking after our house in Sweden. Joy lives in San Francisco.

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I dimly remember the chargé d’affaires—and his wife more clearly. Your real wedding had to be secret because she would gossip!

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Dear Amy

I very gratefully accept your invitation to come to visit you in February. I would like us to go back together to when we were students how we differently understood what was development, change and anthropology then (and why) and how we were severally or similarly influenced by our years there . . . All this as a jumping off point for what happened next and the subsequent convoluted and inter-twined contingencies of the personal and professional that led to shaping us as development practitioners.

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Dear Rosalind

Sounds good. One of the things I remember from our days as postgraduates was that applied anthropology was a little suspect, and I’m not sure I’m completely over the guilt of being a traitor to the discipline. I do some voluntary work with Cultural Heritage without Borders, a Swedish NGO, and I will be away in Bosnia on the following dates

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The following month I flew to Belgrade to meet Amy and Ulf. I sent her in advance a number of themes I suggested we could explore together, citing Ricoeur that, in order to remember ‘we need others’.¹⁹ I, rather than Amy, was the primary object of my enquiry. I hoped she would be sufficiently interested in what I was doing to hold up a mirror to me. She was the first of three women of my age and professional background that I approached in this manner. Mary was next. I had first met her in Khartoum in the late 1970s when she was the wife of the British Council representative. I emailed:

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While my main source of material is myself as research subject—through an auto-ethnographic life history—I am now seeking to introduce an element of ‘second person enquiry’^[20] through conversations with a number of people whom I have known for a long time, who have also spent their lives in

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235 development practice but with whom my contact has been fairly sporadic. The point about this last criterion is that I have found it difficult to achieve the appropriate distance and mutual reflexivity with a person one knows very well.

240 The third person, Carol, I chose because, like Mary and Amy, she was both my age and had also spent most of her adult life in development. Carol and I had been close colleagues when we overlapped for about six months in Sudan in 1981, when we both were working for a large United Nations non-formal education project in which I had been the research officer and she the home economics adviser.

245 Finally, I approached two friends and former colleagues from when I was working for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in the 1990s and with whom since then I had stayed in regular contact. I asked if they would let me listen to and record a conversation between them about the central thesis of my book as presented in two draft chapters I gave them to read. Theirs was not such an extended or structured conversation as the one I had had with the other three. Yet, because we were close friends, they felt
250 at liberty to challenge me more robustly. This helped me take a further more critical look at the extent to which I had guided the previous conversations along lines that interested me, rather than interested those with whom I was speaking. One of them, Pamela, I take as my fourth subject of this article.
255 The fifth subject is me.

The early years of development

260 'Development' was the new buzz word of the 1960s when our subjects arrived to live and work in newly independent Africa. Although some academics were sceptical about development and development aid,²¹ among the development set I mixed with in Burundi there was a belief that, while things might have got off to a shaky start, nevertheless things could only get better. The situation in Burundi, however, would hardly have appeared to confirm such optimism.
265 My future husband had opened the country office in Bujumbura three years after the World Food Programme was founded and was responsible for feeding thousands of refugees created by the political violence and turmoil in the Great Lakes region of Africa that continued for decades thereafter.

270 On the other hand, in English-speaking eastern Africa many of the young British volunteers and teachers were surprised and worried by the prevalence of old colonial norms. Both the author's sister (who was teaching in Kenya) and Carol were part of the circle associated with the periodical *Transition*, published in Uganda and edited by Paul Theroux. In a letter home my sister commented on the notoriety of Theroux's article 'Tarzan is an expatriate'.²²
275 He is particularly critical—'unfairly' she thinks—of the liberal who lives his indulgent expatriate life style while buttering up the new African rulers who are becoming increasingly authoritarian.

280 But in many, many ways he is absolutely right. One is not a real person here. All the little people who were nobody at home are Bwana Mkubwas here and

they have done nothing to deserve it. I get my shopping carried half a mile down the street in Nairobi for 3d. I pay my houseboy £9 a month and he works 6 days a week from 7 in the morning until 9 at night if I want him to though I usually let him go at 6 ... I never wash a dish or ride in public transport or queue in the bank and it is having an effect upon me that I don't like at all. There is very little difference in behaviour between the old type of colonialists and the present bunch of expatriates here. The big difference is that they were honest and we are not ...

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Carol had trained in Britain as a home economics teacher and then joined the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). She understood that VSO saw its role as helping people who had not had the opportunities young people had had in the UK. She was a volunteer for five years, first in Rwandan refugee settlements in Uganda and then in a rural development project for Oxfam in Zambia. Carol did define herself then as a development practitioner. It was partly a matter of lifestyle. On £25 a month it made it difficult to mix with the expatriate crowd—'and VSO almost set you up not to'.

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After Zambia she became a school inspector for the Botswana government and identified herself as an educationalist. She first saw herself as a development professional when she got a job with a UN agency in Sudan in 1980, where she and I met. It was the formal entertaining, even in the highly challenging environment of Khartoum, that summed up for her the development lifestyle. In notes taken after a conversation in 2008, I wrote:

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She said that on arrival in Khartoum she had been 'over-awed' by Gaston and me ... Particularly impressed by the way we entertained—'graciously, formally and correctly'. She remembered a beautifully cooked fillet steak and Gaston carving it. She was amazed how I would go home from the office and in a twinkling prepare and manage a reception graciously and with seeming effortless. Where did I find the food? And how absurd the dinner parties were—we had to wipe the sand off our nice china plates.²³

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Whereas Carol was living and working in Africa as an independent professional woman, Pamela and Mary arrived there as accompanying wives. 'Teaching was the profession you were directed to in the 1960s because you could combine it with marriage' commented Pamela, who married immediately after obtaining a degree in English and Theology.²⁴ She went with husband to Uganda in 1964, then to Malawi, Nigeria and Egypt from where she returned to the UK in 1978. In the first two postings she taught on local contracts in secondary schools.

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In the early '60s those of us teaching in Africa did believe we were part of something big—in the sense that we were totally committed to the idea that education was going to be the thing that would transform everything ... Perhaps that was where my passion lay and nothing ever managed to replace the immediacy of satisfaction it gave me. Those of us who taught in African schools had very direct contact and insights into the lives of people through every day experiences. I can remember how I felt about living in the luxury of an expatriate compound and then driving every day to town to spend eight

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hours in dusty classrooms . . . and then going home at night to dinner parties where people constantly moaned about servants.

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In Nigeria Pamela's husband was employed on a large World Bank integrated rural development project and they lived in a purpose built enclave constructed to accommodate staff and their families. Here she was employed to teach the children of the staff (including her own three). Finally, in her last move with her then husband to Egypt, she taught English as a foreign language to adults.

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Mary also had a degree in English. Her life as an expatriate housewife started in Nigeria in 1972, where her husband, whom she had met at university, was posted in his first job for the British Council. Here he was responsible for running the VSO programme.

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She didn't work and wonders why she chose not to teach in Nigeria—perhaps because it was what it was assumed she would do.

I think for me it was very much the travel that we managed to do in Nigeria, which wasn't a lot, that first got me going and thinking about sociology, essentially. Noticing big gender differences, things like this, behaviours and so on. And it may have been proximity to people of my age engaged as volunteers or working with NGOs that encouraged me to look more closely at people's lives to understand why they weren't understanding their disadvantage before considering how to intervene.

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From Nigeria they moved to Jordan, where Mary did voluntary work with Palestinian refugees while looking after her small children. In 1978 they moved to Sudan and, with the children now at school, Mary looked for more substantial voluntary work that involved her travelling outside the capital city. Then from 1981 to 1983 they were in Cairo.

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Amy and I first went to Africa under our own steam and stayed on after getting married. My life as an accompanying spouse—until I got an international contract in Sudan—was very similar to Pamela's and Mary's, either working voluntarily or on local contracts and the rest of the time being wife, mother and incorporated wife.²⁵ Amy married a Zambian, an up-and-coming professional:

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When I was there shortly after independence, white people, black people, there was a feeling of—it was wonderful. Anybody, we can do it together, all of us. Even white butchers on the copper belt, who would be the most reactionary people, they might make racist jokes—which they did—but they would say things like, 'Well, you know, I might not have been for this a few years ago but let's have a go'. So I felt very . . . positive.

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I was more negative. My letters home record my frustrations with the expatriate life and reflect my husband's acerbic remarks about working with Zambians. As a UN wife with diplomatic status I was forbidden a work permit. I worked part time as a translator for the Embassy of Zaire. I was jealous of Amy, married to a Zambian, who could apply for 'proper jobs'. Initially she worked as a local consultant for the FAO in the part of the

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country where she had done her doctoral fieldwork—and there was even talk, never realised, of giving her an international contract when they discovered how useful an anthropologist could be. Then she found a job with the Food and Nutrition Commission to design accessible information for people. She found it ‘interesting and a puzzle’ and also liked doing something practically useful.

Doing the job was not because I chose to do good at all. It was because there I was, married, I needed to work and this was something that I was confident at. And I learned the job on the job.

Amy thought she would stay in Zambia, saw herself as a Zambian, working quietly away integrating herself into the local context. She continued this way of working when her marriage broke up and she moved to Botswana and to a contract in the extra-mural department of the university where she developed her interest and skills in popular communication. Although her salary in both countries came indirectly from international aid funds, she never thought of herself as part of the aid system. She took the jobs because she needed the money and because they were interesting. She had studied anthropology because she was fascinated by the interconnectedness of things and brought this same intellectual interest to her jobs. However, as time went by, she became increasingly committed to doing good *practical* work.

Like Carol, Amy did not see herself as a development professional, which she understood as someone with certain expectations, a notion of superiority and who pushes ‘their way to the front of the line’.

And the quiet ones, like me, no-one would ever identify as working in development. We have pre-sifted the loud, the big, the flashy. Those are the development workers. The quiet people who are going in there and working, even if they look different, I don’t think we categorise them that way.

Development professionals are those who ‘spin around the world’ commented Amy, who recollected that this was how she saw my husband and me at that time. I was envious and bitter about not getting a job and achieving status among the world spinners—to talk to the men at the UN receptions rather than being shunted off among the wives.

Development crises and new skills

Following the oil shock of 1973 the world economy grew increasingly sluggish and by the early 1980s there was a global economic recession. However, the long-term effect of the oil shock took some time to be felt and after a short fall in 1973, the overall volume of aid increased.²⁶ Petrodollars were circulating and developing countries were borrowing more money. There was still sufficient optimism among the development set to debate what was needed to ensure that ‘basic needs’ were met and poverty eliminated in the Third World. Large ambitious projects, such as that employing Pamela’s husband in Nigeria, were being established all over sub-Saharan Africa and recruiting teams of international ‘experts’.

425 It was on one such project with its head office in Khartoum that I finally
 found my development job when I accompanied my husband from Benin
 (where I had worked on a local contract at the university teaching English
 literature) to Sudan in 1977. Initially hired by a dyslexic project manager to
 write his annual report, I moved to local consultancy status and then in 1979
 430 to an international contract as ‘UN expert’. Exhilarated by having what I saw
 as a proper job, I was cheerfully optimistic, despite living and working in a
 part of the world where most of the rural people I met there told me things
 were getting worse. If worried about such comments, I attributed them to
 misplaced colonial nostalgia. I was embarrassed when older people would tell
 me how much better life had been when their country was still a colony.²⁷ I
 tended to keep such conversations to myself and such anecdotes largely
 435 eluded the still prevailing optimistic official development discourses during
 the 1970s.²⁸ To report such conversations would make me appear to be one
 of those racist colonial types that I encountered at every dinner party and
 reception—and, worse, confirm my husband’s own prejudices.

440 Yet it seemed that each of the countries I had lived in before coming to
 Sudan—Burundi, Zambia, Zaire, Benin—had become more authoritarian
 and repressive, while all around were signs of physical deterioration of infra-
 structure and worries about growing insecurity. Mary remembered this also:

445 Sudan was in very steady decline at the time. I mean, in terms of its
 development, health and education and so on. And the political vacuum sort of
 opening up, it then led potentially to the whole military coming in.

450 My passionate desire for a ‘proper’ job had been driven more by a need for
 personal fulfilment than any earlier motive I had possessed of making a
 better world. Yet, once I *had* the job with the International Labour
 Organisation (ILO) in Sudan, it was the latter which gave me energy and
 455 enthusiasm shaping my practice and advocacy. My husband’s mentoring
 helped me operate in the complex world of international aid bureaucratic
 politics but life with him—none of the fellow travellers had aid bureaucrats
 as husbands—incorporated me more into the mainstream of non-reflexive
 development practice than the other subjects of this article. This may well
 have contributed to my eventually reaching a senior position in a
 development bureaucracy and abandoning any status as ‘fellow traveller’.

460 The convention of the time was that international experts needed
 government counterparts to ensure capacity development and sustainability
 of impact. Thus, in what was subsequently to become one of the major
 critiques of ‘projectised’ aid, development experts nagged governments to
 provide and pay for counterparts for the many projects that had been the
 inspiration of international development professionals rather than a result of
 local demand. I adopted the counterpart idea with enthusiasm and in
 465 subsequent consultancy work for FAO in the first half of the 1980s, designed
 projects that included new units and sections in overstretched and under-
 resourced ministries of agriculture, ~~thereby encouraging increases in state
 running costs budgets for projects dreamt up in Rome rather than in the
 country concerned.~~

Mary's experience in Sudan was very different, working as a volunteer for an international NGO that was managing agricultural resettlement schemes for Eritrean refugees. With her children old enough to live with her husband, this was her first opportunity to travel independently:

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I can remember feeling quite liberated in terms of this scale of country, the gentleness of the people and the way that you could interact and travel on your own, and did all things very normal and part of all that was going on . . . I was thinking, about those Sudan days and how important it was for me to come to terms with wanting to be actively engaged and feeling that I didn't really have the scholarship or the background to do it. But that wasn't a deterrent, it was more of a spur to just engage, and I think, you know, it was an era, if you like, when there was tremendous space for volunteerism for working with NGOs.

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Between 1978 and 1990 all four fellow travellers returned to university in the UK to study for Master's degrees. Pamela, the first to arrive in Africa was the first to leave when she returned to the UK to take a Master's degree in West African studies and got divorced. She discovered feminist anthropology, which led to taking a further degree in anthropology at Oxford. Mary—still married to the man she met when an undergraduate—returned to Britain when her husband was posted to head office and took a Master's in rural development. She had done a huge amount of reading, thinking and discussing and realised she wanted to learn more about how to 'make things happen'. In Sudan she had learnt how to observe.

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You learnt how to . . . think about change and understand the sort of discourse around technology transfers. How to incorporate the social much more strongly. We had to be able to identify and recognise how people learnt to work together in a different sort of way, that they were changing more than just swapping one technique for another, and I think that for me that was very empowering. And later on, when I was a busy consultant, I can remember feeling very pleased about recognising when you had asked a very good question.

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As a teenager Amy had wanted to study medicine but her family dissuaded her because it was not seen as a suitable job for a woman and with the lengthy period of study there was a high risk she might drop out to get married. When her contract ended in Botswana, where she met Ulf, she brought that early interest together with her anthropology background to take a Master's in community health. Finally there was Carol. After working in Sudan she transferred to another UN agency and to a long-term job in Kenya on a rural women's project. Just as the FAO home economics unit in Rome transformed itself in the 1980s into the Women in Development (WID) unit, so Carol found she had become a WID specialist and enrolled for a Master's degree in gender and development in the UK.

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I felt I needed academic credentials to back up my experience . . . Also there were younger people coming along with degrees in 'development' and I did not want to be left behind and not up to date with current thinking that was rapidly moving.

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As Mary put it when commenting on an earlier draft of this article, 'We had all been willing to submit our experience to ideas and learning'. While the fellow travellers were stretching their wings, Africa in the 1980s went into a sustained debt crisis. Suddenly everything was seen to be going wrong in the development sector. By the end of the century we were being offered a picture of Africa as nothing but a sea of corruption and violence.²⁹ As cynicism replaced optimism in the 1980s, so development workers' jokes became more pointed. This was when I first heard that the definition of aid was money going from poor people in rich countries to rich people in poor countries. When, in a landmark report in 1981, the World Bank analysed what it thought had gone wrong in Africa, it admitted that donors shared the responsibility for all the unsuitable projects and inappropriate policies that had led to Africa's stagnation.³⁰

530 **People-centred development and after ...**

535 Already in the mid-1970s a few development agencies had begun to hire socio-cultural analysts to work on rural development issues alongside agricultural economists, agronomists and engineers. New ideas were circulating among the younger development professionals, such as 'community participation', 'women in development' and 'rapid rural appraisal'. In Sudan Carol and I learnt about participatory training needs assessments and participatory ways of working with the national staff that Carol afterwards used as the basis for her work in Kenya. 'Where did we learn this from?', she asked me. 'Hmm ... there was Jo in UNICEF who introduced me to Robert Chambers; there were various visiting consultants—and of course I ordered books and studied latest thinking on non-formal education'.

540 The new skills and knowledge that Pamela, Amy, Mary and lastly Carol acquired at university in the 1980s positioned them well for the expanded opportunities of the 1990s. Three trends are worth identifying. First, the increased concern about the social impact of structural adjustment programmes in Africa and elsewhere,³¹ which culminated in the World Bank's Poverty Report of 1990; second, the continuation of second wave feminism as manifested in the 1985 Third UN Women's Conference in Nairobi, which then built up a head of steam for the Fourth Conference in Beijing in 1995; and third, the growing popularity in the 1980s of participatory development and methods that then received a big boost when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the discourse of civil society and rights began to enter the language of development professionals. The fellow travellers contributed to as well as rode the wave of change.

545 Already by the mid-1980s it was possible to earn a living as a consultant on social, gender and participation issues. Amy and her new Swedish architect husband were now in Ethiopia, where he was a technical adviser for SIDA, the Swedish aid agency. This was Amy's first experience as an accompanying spouse but times had changed and SIDA was interested in taking advantage of her skills and experience. She was given a local contract as cross-cutting adviser on social issues. The work in Ethiopia was 'fascinating, and I always try to

understand small things. You know, why does this happen? Why does that happen?'. Apart from her early consultancy work for the FAO in Zambia, this is the only time in her life that Amy considers she was working as a development professional, because she was integrated into a bilateral aid agency. 565

On completing her Master's, Mary became a tutor for a year in the same university, teaching 'participatory development' to overseas students as something 'radical and exciting'. Then her husband was once again posted on an overseas assignment, this time to Syria, where there were no employment opportunities and life was 'frustrating'. But after two years—another sign of the change in attitudes—her husband was offered a post in Saudi Arabia along with a job for Mary, 'because they wanted to reach out to the women in Saudi Arabia . . . to expand their education and training opportunities'. In 1986 Mary and her husband returned to the UK and Mary was able to get her job back at the university, teaching on courses designed for overseas students combined with consultancy assignments as a social analyst on health, agriculture and forestry projects. 570 575

I think there was gradually this awareness of: it's not just an expert unloading advice. It was broadening out to a collective effort that saw the shift of power as being very important and very necessary. And the shift of power, of course, not just to developing country governments but to people themselves. 580

Nevertheless, she still saw herself as having been on the margins of the development world, doing consultancies in Yemen and the Sudan. But then in the early 1990s she re-engaged with Nigeria, where she did regular consultancy work, and realised that she aspired to get closer to the centre of development policy action, contributing to change that required action beyond the budgets of NGOs or the agency of a consultant. She decided to apply for a full-time job as a social development adviser in the UK aid ministry. There was a pleasure in reaching a sufficiently senior level to make space for the social issues that mattered to her. 585 590

Carol's British husband, whom she had met when they were both working as teachers in Botswana, had long since returned to teach in Britain. On completing her Master's she based herself in the UK, undertaking consultancies which were becoming ever more available as social and gender issues came to the fore in the 1990s. Her first encounter with the British aid ministry was a surprise, as she had not appreciated how ignorant were most head office staff in London of field realities. She continued consulting, interspersed with short-term locum positions as an adviser, now working in Asia as much as in Africa. By the middle of the decade her husband had decided to return to working in developing countries and took a teaching post in Sri Lanka. In time Carol found that she herself was increasingly doing consultancies there for international NGOs and the UN, interspersed with trips to Malawi and Rwanda. 595 600 605

Pamela worked as a consultant in the late 1980s until she secured full-time permanent employment as a social development adviser in the UK aid ministry in 1989 and where I had been working since late 1986. Pamela was

610 assigned the Africa brief and found herself involved, on the one hand, in
advising on the social dimensions of structural adjustment programmes and,
615 on the other, integrating the social dimension into different sector projects,
such as fisheries, forestry and health.

Amy's husband joined an architectural practice in Sweden and she found a
615 job as a library assistant at the university. Gradually she was promoted to a
lectureship and she worked on the SIDA-funded international training
programmes the university was running in relation to housing and urban
620 planning. She was teaching on these courses and also running workshops
overseas in developing countries. 'How do you get gender equality into the
conservation and management of historic buildings? Great fun.' She stayed
on when her husband went back to work for SIDA, first as a consultant and
then as an aid official in the Balkans after the war ended.

All five women continued to work after 2000 but things had changed. People
625 spoke less about rights-based approaches to development and more about
growth. The expectations from the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference failed to
be realised and development practice focused on efficiency and new aid
modalities. Everything became more 'managerial and corporate and policy-
oriented'. There seemed less opportunity to work on projects which, according
to the friend who participated in my conversation with Pamela, had given:

630 A sense of being able to engage with people—and given that that was pretty
important for me—I probably enjoyed that environment. Then we became
much more managerial and corporate and policy-oriented and so forth. The
enjoyment went out of it a bit for me. Which is probably why now, I enjoy
635 doing much more sorts of things that I was doing in the early days, and you can
only do them now in environments which are in deep conflict, because those are
the only environments which people want to know about, because they know
they've got the whole thing wrong.

Mary felt similarly when reflecting on her days as a consultant:

640 I'd also done some fascinating work in Yemen looking at barriers to women's
development, as we used to think about it then. And so felt very at home in that
environment, I have to say . . . The opportunity that those missions gave to apply
your thinking, your observation, putting different things together, challenging—
645 exposing certain things, I mean it was so valuable, and I felt coming into ODA/
DFID it still carried weight. But that didn't last forever, of course. I get a sense
that the weight of that analysis isn't the same that it used to be.

Mary continued to take advantage of her increased seniority in the first
650 decade of the new century to 'harness the vestiges of the social agenda for
stronger policy partnerships' but was on the verge of retiring at the time of
our conversation.

Amy eventually retired from the university and went to live with Ulf in the
Balkans, picking up interesting work on a voluntary basis.

655 What's interesting here is, I don't feel like I'm a diplomatic wife at all . . . When
I started meeting, going out for lunches with friends, they'd say, 'Well, how are

you doing? I'll take you shopping on Saturday.' And I'd say, 'You know, that's really sweet but I'm really not into shopping' . . . Because I have this work that is, again, at my own time because it's volunteer, but I'm committed to it. And I'm committed up to the time we leave here.

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Carol's consultancy work started to become distasteful:

I never liked the whole business plan thing—and countries don't like that—don't like to think you're seeing them as a business. I'm not against targets and I'm not against accountability, not at all, but I'm not sure about accountability you're manipulating everything around that.

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She has also stopped paid employment and is researching and writing a book related to her early years as a volunteer in Uganda. Pamela retired, undertook some consultancies and studied drama and painting.

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Although each life trajectory has been unique, what these women share is an energetic curiosity to find out what local reality looks like through local people's eyes. All emphasised the intrinsic interest of the job itself to learn about the local context and to bring this to the attention of planners and bureaucrats. Hence there was a frustration and irritation that a predominant characteristic of international development practice is that it knows best and is *not* interested in local context. The subjects of this article have struggled against the 'travelling orthodoxies' in which 'the universal [is asserted] over the particular, the travelled over the placed, the technical over the political, and the formal over the substantive'.³² Amy, the one least ready to admit that she has had any significant involvement with development, most strongly objected to the carriers of this universal knowledge—to the 'superiority' of development professionals who have been everywhere and know everything. This is why she did not want to count herself in as a development professional and, while she continued to position herself more firmly on the margins than the others, they also felt discomfort with mainstream development practice, which they felt had got worse rather than improved in the past 10 years. Both Carol and Mary commented on how development practice has narrowed and become more professional and that the current generation of development practitioners lacks the 'versatility for facilitating change' and the grounded experience that they brought to their work once they had got proper jobs after 20 years of being resourceful at finding interesting stuff to do.

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Conclusion

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What difference did these women—and those like them make?³³ Their concern for process and relationships resulted in many aid projects of the 1990s being designed for iterative learning and adjustment rather than rolling out universal blueprints. Their sensitivity to issues of 'them and 'us' and of their own positionality combined with an appreciation of diversity and difference, even at the most local level. Their awareness of the operations of power contributed to the wider movement for participatory and rights-based development, which

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705 included a continuing engagement with the causes and consequences of gender
 inequalities. They never claimed to have ‘careers’ and are modest about the
 extent of their achievements—perhaps more so today than they would have
 been if interviewed in the late 1990s when it seemed that the issues that
 710 concerned them were at last gaining traction. Instead, this moment has
 dissipated—possibly as their particular generation lost its influence as it began
 to retire—or because the world itself had changed post-9/11.

The thesis of this special issue is that individual agency matters to the
 conceptualisation and delivery of aid programmes. Yet how far it matters
 and what it achieves depends on wider circumstances. I have taken a
 715 historical perspective to explore this in relation to the causes of what
 happened to international aid in the 1990s. Although the people-centred
 development decade can be explained at the systemic level by the end of the
 Cold War, such an explanation alone is insufficient. During the years leading
 up to this change a generation of development semi-professionals had been
 720 preparing the ground. The women in this article were caught up and part of
 the two great emancipatory moments of the 20th century: freedom from
 colonialism and the women’s liberation movement. These moments shaped
 their consciousness and produced political effects that gave them the
 opportunity to influence development practice. That they were able to make
 725 use of that opportunity is explained by their versatility and entrepreneurship,
 developed through a force of circumstance that had given them an education
 but denied them the traditional career path taken by their male peers.

Their energy and enthusiasm derived from the possibility to do things,
 learn from them and do other things. With a degree in English one had the
 nerve to become an agricultural extension adviser; another converted herself
 730 from a home economics teacher to a gender and development specialist; the
 anthropologist became part of an intellectual community of architects. In the
 context of managing and sustaining complicated personal lives and
 relationships their professional practice was the art of bricolage and make-
 do. Indeed, it may have been just that which made their individual agency
 735 matter as much as I believe (or hope) it did.

Notes

I am grateful to my fellow travellers for their willingness to engage in this project, including providing
 740 critical feedback on an earlier draft. Thanks also to Meike Fechter for her support and encouragement.

1 These are pseudonyms.

2 <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/135600.html>.

AQ4 3 See the argument about the value of life-histories in this respect in D Lewis, *Journal of Social Policy*
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745 5 C Six, ‘The rise of postcolonial states as donors: a challenge to the development paradigm?’, *Third*
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6 A-M Fechter & K Walsh, ‘Examining “expatriate” continuities: postcolonial approaches to mobile
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 - 11 A Coles & A-M Fechter, 'Introduction', in Coles & Fechter, *Gender and Family among Transnational Professionals*.
 - 12 In commenting on an earlier draft of this article, Carol mentioned how, when she used to fly business class to Africa and Asia, it was common for her to be the only woman in the cabin. 755
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 - 16 C Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959. 760
 - 17 Some of the details of this correspondence, including all personal names, have been changed to protect the anonymity of the four subjects of this article, other than the author.
 - 18 See R Eyben, 'Becoming a feminist in Aidland', in Coles & Fechter, *Gender and Family among Transnational Professionals*.
 - 19 P Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting*, trans D Pellauer & R McLaughlin, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004.
 - 20 Second person enquiry is the co-construction of knowledge between two or more people who are researching into their own practice. It is distinguished from 'first person enquiry', in which one researches oneself, and 'third person enquiry', the more conventional method by which a researcher studies other people. See W Torbert, 'The practice of action inquiry', in P Reason & H Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research*, London: Sage, 2001. 765
 - 21 See, for example, R Dumont, *L'Afrique est mal partie*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962; and D Seers, 'International aid: the next steps', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2(4), 1964, pp 471–489. 770
 - 22 P Theroux, 'Tarzan is an expatriate', *Transition*, 32, 1967, pp 13–19.
 - 23 For more about being a hostess in Aidland, see Eyben. 'Becoming a feminist in Aidland'.
 - 24 One-third of all women graduating from Girton College, Cambridge in the early 1960s became teachers. Cambridge University Appointments Board up to the 1960s was said to offer teaching and secretarial work as the chief options. P Thane, 'The careers of female graduates of Cambridge University, 1920s–1970s', in D Mitch, J Brown & M Van Leeuwen (eds), *Origins of the Modern Career*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. 775
 - 25 H Callan & S Ardener (eds), *The Incorporated Wife*, London: Croom Helm, 1984.
 - 26 R Manning, 'What's the future of international aid?', unpublished notes for the Kapuscinski Lecture at the Economic University, Prague, 5 April 2011.
 - 27 See also J Ferguson, 'Of mimicry and membership: Africans and the "New World Society"', *Cultural Anthropology*, 17(4), 2002, pp 551–569.
 - 28 O Dwivedi & J Nef, 'Crises and continuities in development theory and administration: First and Third World perspectives', *Public Administration and Development*, 2, 1982, pp 59–77. 780
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 - 30 World Bank, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 1981.
 - 31 A Cornia, R Jolly & F Stewart, *Adjustment with a Human Face*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
 - 32 Craig & Porter, cited in D Mosse, 'Introduction', in D Mosse (ed), *Adventures in Aidland*, New York: Berghan Press, 2011. 785
 - 33 For further discussion of this point, see R Eyben, 'Mainstreaming the social dimension into the Overseas Development Administration: a partial history', *Journal of International Development*, 15, 2003, pp 879–892 and also the author's forthcoming publications. 795

Notes on contributor

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