

# PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT: AN INDIVIDUAL'S SEARCH FOR A PRACTICAL PEDAGOGY

Larry A. Swatuk

September 2008 marks the first incoming year of students for the Faculty of Environment's new programme in Environment and International Development at the University of Waterloo. I have been selected to serve as the Director of this programme.

For the last 13 years I have been in Africa: one year in South Africa; one year in Nigeria; and eleven years in Botswana. Over this time period I also lived and worked for extended periods of time across much of the African continent and in other parts of the global South. Most of my teaching, training and research has focused on the relationship between the natural environment and socio-economic development, with a particular emphasis on the politics of resource-use decision making.

For example, as a lecturer at the University of Botswana's main campus, I established a small budget for hands-on experience in the tourism industry. Despite the fact that Africans are rarely tourists in their own lands, throughout much of Southern and Eastern Africa 'tourism' is touted to be the main driver of future socio-economic development. Yet land issues are complex and remote spaces ideal for photographic safaris are hotly contested social spaces. As part of course delivery, Botswana students experienced tourism both *as tourists* and as social scientists with the latter involving a four to five days experiential learning.

As a Canadian in Africa, I functioned as something of a node for Canadian and American non-governmental organization (NGO) activity, often linking local students to international programmes such as the University of North Carolina's 'semester abroad' or World University Service of Canada's (WUSC) 'summer seminar' in experiential learning. WUSC's two-week 'homestay' activity, wherein students lived with a local host family in say Salima, Malawi or Serowe, Botswana, was a particularly important element of the summer seminar. This basic format was adapted for delivery in a multi-year, student-based research project in the high-density suburbs outside Mutare, Zimbabwe between 2001 and 2003. If we are to move forward with more nuanced styles and forms of international development, there is no substitute for direct experience of how other people live.

In the course of my eleven year residency in Africa I had the opportunity to take on several roles: as Chairperson of the Ngamiland Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) Forum; as

steering committee member for the policy and institutions working group within the wider Okavango Delta Management Plan Project; as Director of Research for the Natural Resource Governance Research Unit at the Harry Oppenheimer Okavango Research Centre; as Coordinator of the Water and Land Specialisation within the Southern African regional M.Sc. programme in Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM); and as advisor to various government departments in both the global North and South.

In Africa, my teaching methodologies were consistent with good practice in development education. I aimed to enable students to develop critical thinking skills and heightened awareness of development issues while developing a sound empirical base from which to analyse and, if necessary, question 'received wisdom'. Students were encouraged to develop the confidence and critical analysis needed to challenge 'received wisdom' when it clashed with their lived experiences, or with their own goals and aspirations. Development education aims to provide young people with the knowledge, values, skills and understanding required to make decisions that will support social justice and greater equality. Thus, education can be a form of empowerment, self-awareness and self-esteem.

Following my period of employment in Africa, I became engaged in issues of sustainable development – development that is more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable – which involved engaging a new cohort of activists within the high consumption world, unsatisfied with the descriptors 'developed' and 'developing'.

I had the opportunity to address sustainability issues in a new position as the director of a new programme in environment and development in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Waterloo. The programme aimed to provide students from the high-consumption world with a different way of thinking about 'development' – one that replaced the current management fad with history, politics and a firm commitment to linking together 'developmental' processes in the global North and South. This programme would also put development back into the natural environment. For example, it is now clear that global warming casts a dark shadow across the comfortable and sunny narratives of development as management. The programme aims to confront issues like global warming by challenging narratives that depict 'us' in the North as 'developed', and 'them' in the South as 'developing' peoples who must simply emulate us by copying a wide variety of management processes.

Most international development programmes in Canada are long on theory and short on practice. Students learn the ways in which the world has evolved through time and space, but often fail to see how they, armed with their intellectual hammers and trowels, may help break down and

rebuild the more dangerous aspects of this architecture. Many international development students graduate with a feeling of disempowerment, resulting from the state of the world and their inability to ‘change it’.

The environment and development programme seeks to change this in a number of ways. First, it is multi-disciplinary, including *inter alia* geography, politics, planning, business, marketing, economics, development studies and environmental science. There is also scope for students to specialise, as they have eleven electives over four years. Through their course work, students will develop practical skills that can be directly applied ‘in the field’. The programme also includes an eight-month ‘field experience’, where students participate in a development programme or project and apply the knowledge they have gained over three years of course work. In developing this experiential component, I drew upon aspects of similar programmes with which I have been involved in Africa.

To this end, I visited Botswana and South Africa soliciting ideas from academics, government actors, and people involved in the media and with various NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). Their guidance and feedback was understandably varied, but included establishing a strong ethical framework and doing ‘the right thing’. The visited suggesting ideas and proposals for the immersion of students on the programme to gain a better understanding of life in the global South through observation and collaboration with civil society groups in African states like Botswana and South Africa. Thus, my previous experience in Africa has helped to inform my current work on environment and development including the importance of experiential learning as an important aspect of development education.

**Larry A. Swatuk, PhD** is currently serving as Associate Professor and Director in the Environment and International Development Programme in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Waterloo, Canada.