Collaboration, Participation and Inequality in International Development

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Course Description:

This course is designed to help students develop the attitudes and skills to work effectively in teams, make short-term contributions to existing, long-term efforts toward collaborative change, and to pursue ethical community engagement and fieldwork in an international NGO/social enterprise setting. The course also examines the organizational dimensions of development projects and community-based work, and how these dynamics inform the design, implementation and outcomes of international development initiatives.

Students take this course as part of the Global Engagement Studies Institute (GESI) program, alongside International Studies 393-SA: Development, Non-Profits, and Social Change in a Global Context.

*Note: This syllabus is subject to change. If changes are made, students will be emailed the updated syllabus, and it will be updated on the Canvas homepage.

Course Objectives:

- To improve students’ capacity to work collaboratively and reflexively in teams, both in their GESI groups and host organization context
- To introduce students to the bureaucratic, social and institutional work that underlies the public face of development and humanitarian work. And for students to think critically about the vast array of relationships that must be built and maintained in order for development projects to happen.
- For students to engage critically with concepts of ‘community participation’ and ‘community engagement’.
- To develop students skills in critical thinking, humility and reflexivity in a way that allows them to reflect both on the limitations of international development, and on the pitfalls of gods-eye-view critique.

Course Components:

1. One Week of Intensive Pre-departure Coursework at Northwestern
2. Approximately 2-month Team Development Work in Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ghana, Guatemala, Uganda, or Vietnam (8 hours a day, 5 days a week for a total of 280 hours). Written reports required.
3. Periodic Cultural Enrichment Activities as organized by local partners.
4. Three-day Final Reflection Summit at Northwestern
Course materials

All readings and videos are available on the Canvas site for this course.

The classroom portion of the pre-departure seminar is concentrated and intense. Students are required to have read and viewed listed materials in advance of the relevant class session. Students are strongly encouraged to have completed the reading before they arrive for the pre-departure seminar. Then you will be in a position to prepare for class sessions by reviewing the course materials and reminding yourself of arguments and perspectives presented therein.

Academic Integrity

University policies on academic integrity apply to this course. Cheating (using unauthorized materials or giving unauthorized assistance during an examination or other academic exercise) and plagiarism (using another's ideas or words without acknowledgment) are serious offenses in a university. All quotations and ideas taken from others should be appropriately cited in all written work. For more information on University policy on academic integrity, see Academic Integrity Policy.

Students with Disabilities

If you have specific disabilities that require accommodation, please let the instructor know at the beginning of the course so that your learning needs may be appropriately met. Northwestern is committed to providing appropriate academic accommodations to ensure equal access to fully participate in academic programming. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact AccessibleNU http://www.northwestern.edu/accessiblenu, 2122 Sheridan Road, Room 130, (847) 467-5530, accessibleNU@northwestern.edu.

Assignments and Evaluation

The assignments for this course are designed to develop your skills and measure your progress in achieving the learning goals described above. Students’ grades for the course will be calculated based on the following components:

- Seminar participation: 25%
- Fieldwork reflection assignments: 50%
- Final report and presentation: 25%
Schedule and reading assignments

Session 1: Humility
This session introduces students to the necessity for humility in international development and in community engagement. We explore the history of ‘cultural competency’ and ‘cultural humility’ and consider what the difference between these concepts makes to efforts to collaborate across cultural difference.


Session 2: Participation
In this session, we take a look at the concept of ‘participation’ in international development and NGO work. We examine how this concept emerged in the wake of critiques of top-down development projects, and we discuss some of the ways in which participatory development continues to reproduce local and global inequalities.


Session 3: Development institutions
What does an international development project do? This session explores the institutional, bureaucratic and relational work that underlie international development. We consider how our preconceptions of the ‘real work’ of international development – providing assistants to a ‘local community’ – constitutes only a small proportion of development practice.


Session 4: Global and local organizations
In this session, we further consider the global inequalities that underlie international development. We explore the ways in which international organizations set development agendas and the disproportionate value attributed to international or expat staff over local development workers. We read a case study of an East African community organization attempts to reject the logics of international development funding.
Session 5: Global ethics?
What ethics should guide social and political action in a world marked by conspicuous global inequality? Is such a thing as ethical international development even possible? In this final session before fieldwork, we consider the possibilities and pitfalls of imagining ethics and political action on a global scale.


[Students complete international fieldwork assignments]

Session 6: Killing with Kindness
In this session, we consider circumstances in which good intentions in international aid do not necessarily match good outcomes. We will focus on Marc Schuller’s ethnography *Killing with Kindness*, but we will also reflect upon students’ own experiences in their own international fieldwork.


Session 7: Anti-politics
This session returns to the question of ‘what does an international development project do?’ (session 3). Reading James Ferguson’s *Anti-Politics Machine* alongside students’ own fieldwork experiences, we will explore the institutional imperatives of development and social enterprise.


Session 8: Robert Chambers
In our final session, we will read a classic text in participatory development: Chambers’ *Putting the Last First*. We will reflect both on the contrast between the ideals set out in the text and the reality of students experiences in their fieldwork. The goal of this session will not only be to interrogate the shortcomings of participation 35 years on, but also to reflect upon the possibilities
for an ethical global engagement in the context of the intractable tensions inherent within the very pretense of international development.