Introduction: Localizing the History of Development

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As the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations for the period 2000–2015 morphed almost seamlessly into the Sustainable Development Goals of 2016–2030, it was clear that the rhetoric and practice of development are deeply entrenched in international systems and in the language of governments, NGOs, and multilateral institutions. Yet, recent popular movements and responses in African locales ranging from South Africa to Ghana and Nigeria remind us that development and service delivery have a particular resonance with local people.\textsuperscript{1} Development theorists and practitioners have increasingly examined the local aspects of development in recent years.\textsuperscript{2} As historians, we know that contestations over development at the local level are not a new phenomenon. Yet, greater historical analysis of the local elements is needed to help us better understand this dynamic of development, especially as it relates to larger themes in African history.

Over the past twenty years, the amount of literature written on the history of development in Africa has grown substantially. Pioneering works by Frederick Cooper, Randall Packard, James Scott, and many others have demonstrated the usefulness of this literature has both taken development as a useful unit of


analysis in its own right, and, in the more substantial body of work, demonstrated how it can be credibly used to reflect, refract, and understand aspects of African societies and governments. Studies of development have been particularly enlightening for the colonial period. Recently, the study of development has entered the postcolonial period as state archives are opening more of their collections, and more scholars are focusing their oral histories on the post-independence era. These more recent works have illuminated the importance of national and transnational phenomenon in the postcolonial period, and have highlighted both the changes and continuities in development from the colonial period. Some examples of this are the transnational impacts of importing Chinese laborers and technologies to rural Tanzanian and Zambian villages as part of the TAZARA Railway project, the manner in which the Cahora Bassa Dam influenced how rural Mozambicans experienced state power, and how NGOs staked out and claimed aspects of state sovereignty in newly independent Sahelian states in West Africa.

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6 Monson, Africa’s Freedom Railway; Isaacman and Isaacman, Delusion of Development; Gregory Mann, From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
With all of the contributions of these studies, few works on development history have attempted to specifically center the narratives and concerns of local communities. Marc Kunkel recently noted that, “historical studies that explore the actual local implementation of development projects remain rare. Yet investigating how such projects changed local experiences, perceptions, dynamics and expectations is doubtless one of the most pressing tasks ahead of future researchers.” Indeed, more work needs to be done to examine the local implementation of projects in a way that will bring to the fore the lived experience of people most impacted by projects. Focusing on local implementation and attitudes toward development, such as Emma Hunter and Robert Ahearne do, illuminates the history of power relations, the intricacies of successes and failures, the exchange and creation of ideas, and the forging of identities. Moreover, focusing on individuals and communities at a local level can reveal the agency that these actors have. Development has not always been imposed or brought by outside forces like the state, international agencies, or NGOs. Local initiative has played an important role in conceiving of, starting, and carrying out projects as well. Centering individuals and communities in this way does not mean, however, that we are arguing that local people defined development in the same way, or were monolithic in their responses to projects. People, as well as governments, contested the meanings of development, both as set forth by governments, as well as by peers. Yet, if we only rely on the records of aid agencies, governments, and those who administered projects, we risk, as Corinna Unger noted, simply “replicat[ing] the modernizers’ perspective.” She recommends using “context-conscious historical case studies” to “give us a better understanding of how development and modernization actually happen, and how the related experiences of both lay people and experts translate back into theory and policy.” These historical perspectives that attempt to remove the state or international agencies from their position at the center forces us to consider, with equal importance, the role played by “lay people” in the contestations over development taking place in the late colonial and early independence periods across Africa.

Through case studies in five different countries, this special issue centers the experiences, thoughts, and actions of Africans more marginal to power in the late colonial and early independence periods. Setting grassroots actors on an equal footing with the state gives fresh perspective on a number of aspects of development and African history. It forces us to reconsider how Africans forged and asserted their own identities and built their own communities during decolonization and in the independence period. In particular, many of the articles focus on the ideas of self-help and/or self-sufficiency. These terms, 


like development itself, were quite malleable, and so their meanings were also contested by a range of actors simultaneously defining what independence and citizenship meant. The perspectives of the articles in this issue further illuminates how Africans saw their relationship(s) with the state and state-building projects, as well as their relationships with international agencies. Finally, these articles examine the nature of transnational engagements around development rhetoric and projects in the early independence period, both between Africans from different countries on the continent, and between Africans and the wider Global South.

We use the term “development” broadly to include the various schools of thoughts and definitions held by scholars, practitioners, and local people. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard defined the term as encompassing the industries, theories, and practices that all fall under the general “orthodoxy” of the idea “that foreign aid and investment on favorable terms, the transfer of knowledge of production techniques, measures to promote health and education, and economic planning would lead impoverished countries to be able to become ‘normal’ market economies.”¹⁰ This definition, however, does not take into account the power of individuals to redefine the term in their own contexts, and in particular, it ignores the sense that people see and saw development as a path to personal and community prosperity. Further, the people under study in these articles were not particularly consistent about how they used the term development. Thus, we have kept the definition deliberately broad and open ended, arguing that development encompassed a coherent, if not always agreed-upon, ideology that allowed individuals, communities, and state actors to dream of new economic and political futures.

**Specific Cases of Development at the Local Level**

The issue starts with two articles examining the role self-help initiatives played in defining independence in Lesotho and Kenya. John Aerni-Flessner details how various Basotho conceptualized development during the transition to independence up until the 1970 coup in Lesotho. Politicians and administrators turned to small-scale projects to bolster their power as there was no funding available for larger-scale projects. Individuals carried out similar small projects through youth and community groups, even when funding and state support were scarce. Aerni-Flessner argues that the widespread nature of these projects—run by the state and on individual initiative—helped more individuals grapple with the potentials independence held for the populace and the government. Kara Moskowitz investigates the role of self-help in the immediate independence period in Kenya. There, self-help projects became an important site for defining the new state’s relationship with its citizens, but for different reasons than in Lesotho. Citizens participated eagerly and strategically in self-help because they saw the projects as a way to make claims on the state for services and infrastructure. Through their initiative in building structures, they greatly complicated the process of creating new infrastructure after independence that national politicians had hoped to control in a top-down fashion. Local participation in self-help was more than simply a way to contest development priorities, however, as communities also

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exchanged loyalty for donations to their projects and thus contributed to the emergence of a clientelistic political system in independent Kenya.

The next two articles examine responses to South African “separate development” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Molly McCullers analyzes how the Herero responded to state development initiatives in Southwest Africa in the 1960s in the midst of questions about whether the territory would become part of apartheid South Africa or gain its independence under United Nations’ supervision. McCullers charts how the apartheid state masked its attempts to consolidate political control through its use of the rhetoric of development. Debates about development thus became enmeshed in a struggle over what decolonization would mean in this particular context, as the Herero resisted apartheid state development efforts as a means of rejecting the integration of Southwest Africa into South Africa. Following chronologically on the heels of McCullers’ article, Leslie Hadfield highlights the development approach of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. Black university students started this movement in the late 1960s to liberate the black mind-set in hopes of bringing about a total transformation of South African society. They ran community outreach projects in an effort to also address the material conditions in the broader black community. Hadfield explores Black Consciousness activists’ use of Paulo Freire’s ideas to help refine how they structured community development initiatives. The participatory methods and critical pedagogy that were central to Freire’s work led these young South Africans to a more refined and effective praxis in communities. The article demonstrates the importance of interrogating exchanges of ideas between actors in the Global South, and emphasizes that conversations about how to bring about development occurred, at times, outside of state control and view.

The last pair of articles narrate how the newly independent state of Tanzania viewed refugees in two different contexts, and how the refugees made use of spaces opened to them by development to claim and challenge citizenship. Jill Rosenthal’s article examines how Rwandan refugees in the western Mwesi Highlands interacted with state and international refugee agencies. These state and international actors attempted to fit the refugees into their vision of development for nation and institution building, but the non-cooperation of refugees “illustrates the ways in which local spaces of refugee development became transnational spaces of contestation and control.” The refugees subverted the state-building plans of Tanzania, but also the goals of the humanitarian organizations responsible for setting up and running the camps. The refugees feared losing their claim to residence in regional states if they acceded to the demands of Tanzanian and international officials. Their struggle highlights the ability of groups, even ones marginalized as refugees were, to exert control over their lives in ways that forced state and multilateral agencies to recognize their liminality as well as their power. In southern Tanzania, the Mozambican refugees that Joanna Tague chronicles had a very different reaction to state-sponsored programs. Tague writes about how refugees fleeing the anti-colonial war in northern Mozambique welcomed the platted villages the Tanzanian state offered as sites of resettlement. The refugees eagerly helped construct infrastructure, farmed the land, and sent their children to school. The interests of the refugees in building new lives through accessing state services aligned with the interest of the Tanzanian state in having more rural communities to better demarcate and protect the state’s southern boundary. The state
also needed the refugees to construct the roads, public water taps, and schools that served as physical markers of the newly independent nation-state, especially on the border of a Portuguese colony. As a result both the refugees and the Tanzanian state capitalized on the situation, an outcome that challenges notions of in/exclusion and citizenship.

The Significance of Small-Scale Projects and Self-Help

In one way or another, all of the articles in this special issue deal with self-help initiatives or local, small-scale projects that did not necessarily have a wider resonance. While governments and individuals were all using the same words to describe self-help or self-sufficiency, the meanings they ascribed to such terms varied widely. Governments deployed the term in an effort to elicit support for nation-building efforts and in an attempt to mobilize political support. Student, youth, and community groups, on the other hand, utilized the concepts to construct their own development initiatives, participate in government-sponsored programs on their own terms, demand more government services, and make citizenship claims. Initially, the Kenyan self-help projects were far more empowering of local communities than those in Lesotho, where the government used such projects strictly as a way to project state power into rural areas and mobilize labor in the service of government-run development projects operating on a meager budget. In both cases, however, local groups came to see the projects as an opportunity to create the structures that brought about the type of communities they wanted to see from independence. In Namibia the apartheid government attempted to deploy the rhetoric of separate development to achieve its desired political ends, a concept that emphasized the need for different racial groups to development along their own trajectories. Local actors quickly saw through these attempts and many people rejected separate development they saw as being designed to further enmesh them in the apartheid state-building project that they roundly rejected. Both the state and local actors deployed the idea and rhetoric of self-help and self-sufficiency in the Tanzanian examples. Local people used the concepts to make citizenship claims on the state in Tague’s example, and refugees rejected the authority of the state over individuals and the community as a whole by rejecting self-help plans in Rosenthal’s example. Finally, Black Consciousness activists focused on remaking the black sense of self under apartheid South Africa, through both their philosophy and community action. In doing so, they hoped to increase black self-reliance, but also learned they had to refine their own understandings of their positionality in relation to the community members they attempted to work with. In all of these cases, the rhetorics of self-help and self-sufficiency better illuminate how communities and individuals used the rhetoric and practice of development to redefine their own relationships with the state and within local communities.

Rethinking the Nexus of Independence and Decolonization

Through multiple analyses of debates around development, these articles also reframe the story of independence and decolonization. Aerni-Flessner argues that understandings of independence were tied to conceptions of development in Lesotho from the 1950s to the 1970s. Similarly in Kenya, Moskowitz shows how self-help evolved into a system of political patronage in the newly independent country, and in the process redefined how
Kenyans understood both politics and development. In these examples, government bureaucrats and politicians facing the logic of their own system—budgets and politics—were unable and unwilling to give up the decision-making power and control over projects that local communities desired. The tensions of development, thus, included struggles over the definition of what independence meant in terms of the balance of local versus national power. Often, the markers for this struggle were structures, physical markers on the land in concrete and steel, mud and clay. This was also the case for the Mozambican refugees Tague describes in Tanzania, who physically built most of the infrastructure in the villages that became their new homes. The physical act of construction undergirded claims the refugees made to citizenship, both formal and informal. It also underscored their skilled contributions to building the nation. Similarly, refugees in western Tanzania in Rosenthal’s article were confronted with a state that linked the question of citizenship to “notions of hard work and cooperation, embodied by the creation of voluntary, self-governed, cooperative rural villages devoted to the work of agricultural, and so national development.” When the refugees refused to follow the plans of the Tanzanian government and physically build the communities, they were contesting the ability of the Tanzanian state to govern their actions. Through this, they asserted that their own independence and citizenship lay in their control, rather than in the hands of the Tanzanian state or the UNHCR representatives tasked with running the camp.

In the articles on South Africa and Southwest Africa, local people were also redefining development in an effort to assert independence or obtain liberation. McCullers demonstrates that while the apartheid state’s idea of “separate development” was promoted as forward thinking, it felt “so backwards to Southwest Africans” because of the underlying ideological drive to elevate white Afrikaner interests through these state initiatives. On account of this, the Herero leaders reacted by rejecting state development, even if it would have meant more structures and services in their communities. The Black Consciousness activists Hadfield writes about also viewed apartheid’s “separate development” as oppressive. In this case, however, the activists at the local level worked to subvert “separate development” by focusing on “community development” through conscientization. In fact, they redefined development to serve their own, forward-looking purposes of liberation.

The Transnational, Refugees, and Global South Exchanges

By looking “out” from the local perspective, this collection of articles offers unique insights into transnational interactions and exchanges in development. In doing so, the articles suggest that historians and other scholars need to pay attention to how local communities reacted to, attempted to utilize, and helped shape international, transnational, and supranational institutions. In the articles by Rosenthal and Tague, for example, refugee communities helped shape and limit the range of possible actions their transnational actors could take in setting policies. In McCullers’ work, the United Nations and the threat of its (in)action informed the choices of Herero leaders and community members. These individuals used the potential of United Nations’ intervention to demand independence, while constraining, to some extent, how the apartheid government could implement its preferred policies in Southwest Africa.
The Tanzanian articles also highlight how thinking of development solely as a national process can be limiting, as the government’s policies affected and played out among refugees from Rwanda and Mozambique. As Tague notes, having non-national citizens affected by and shaping development projects blurred the line between categories of refugee, migrant, and citizen in southern Tanzania for the state and in the minds of individuals. Some refugees even saw themselves as citizens of multiple states. Rosenthal highlights how the resistance of the resettled Rwandan population to assimilation caused many to be jailed, but also forced the government and international organizations to rethink how they attempted to exert authority. This raised questions about how much autonomy refugees should have in their host countries. Finally, Hadfield narrates how Freire’s pedagogical theories, born in a Chilean-Brazilian context, came to South Africa, where activists utilized and reshaped them for use within the particular context of fighting the 1970s apartheid system. The intellectual exchange between actors from the Global South resulted in philosophical and tactical innovations completely outside state-led development ideas and initiatives. As they adapted Freire’s methods in their local context, the activists changed their own conceptions of development and ran projects more in concert with local communities.

The Importance of Studying the Local in Development History

Finally, considering these articles together raises questions for further investigation into the origins of community development, what it means if the state or other outsiders act as instigators of self-help or self-reliance programs, and what we learn when development initiatives bring more inequality. We hope that historians will continue to study the local aspects of development history for what these attitudes and structures can reveal about development practice. Tague noted that “This enormous capacity for development initiatives to be detrimental—even deleterious—to local lives and livelihoods has prompted several scholars to denounce development as mere delusion.” However, for as many critiques as there are of state and internationally sponsored development projects, the work of development continues unabated. This is because, as Frederick Cooper noted “Critiques [of development] do not bring piped water to people who lack it; they do not ease the burdens of women caught between rural patriarchies and urban exploitation; they do not distribute readily available antidotes to childhood diarrhoea and malaria in areas of high infant mortality.”11 As long as development retains a plausible claim to solve such problems and ameliorate poverty and suffering, there will be people willing to support projects in the hope of making their lives better, or improving access to governmental and NGO services. Yet, as Cooper also noted “assertions that development is a project of self-evident benefit” no more capture the lived experience of individuals and community with development than the critiques. This is so because “neither comes to grips with the specificity of global, local and regional structures that reproduce poverty,” and we would add, the power of states and international aid and development agencies.12


12 Ibid., 6–7.
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this issue show there is no magic formula for development success, or for attempts to harness development to further state policies, citizenship claims, or anti-state resistance. By highlighting the lack of generalizable formulas, they add to arguments about the need for scholars to center local contexts in examinations of particular development initiatives.

While all six of these articles come from states that were part of the British empire in East and Southern Africa, there is also the possibility that developmental processes took on particular forms in these specific territories (and states) that might not be mirrored in other groupings of African states: Francophone and Lusophone countries, predominantly Islamic states, or particular geographic regions like West or Central Africa. Still, while such caveats remain, the preponderance of ways that individuals and communities at the local level responded to development initiatives suggests, at the very least, that attempting to take into account the perspectives of locals is a necessary corrective to scholarship that has for too long privileged the state and state perspectives. The collected articles also suggest that simply ascertaining local reaction to projects is not enough; rather we need to pay more attention to the alternatives that local communities envisioned, whether they came to fruition or not. The possibilities and potentialities of development were as important, in some ways, as what was actually created. Development work is an important site for individuals and communities as a whole to assert what is of value to them, and how they see the future playing out. Taking these visions seriously is our scholarly task.