Engaging anthropology in development and social change: practices, discourses and ethics

Engager l’anthropologie pour le développement et le changement social: pratiques, discours et éthique

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Growing poverty and inequality, emerging ethno-religious tensions and political conflicts, worsening environmental hazards, and increasing social fragmentation remain major challenges of this millennium. This has led to lively debates in politics, development and economics, whereas the relative aloofness of anthropology becomes problematic and almost embarrassing. As the only discipline that is grounded in the inter-subjective relation, an anthropological engagement to social change would perhaps be seen as self-evident. However, engaging anthropology in development and social change raises methodological, epistemological and ethical questions.

A core concern of anthropology remains the engagement that fieldwork implies. Empirically grounded fieldwork provides anthropology with its ethnographic insights and analytical tools. Over the years anthropologists have come to turn their attention to development as a critical anthropological subject of study. Yet the relationship between anthropology and development remains ambiguous. Consultancy, short-term research on a predefined problem, has increased with the demand of development institutions for anthropological knowledge. This situation seems to have deepened the schism between a theoretically oriented anthropology and a more applied anthropology. Major challenges of engaging anthropology are to reconnect theory and practical application, and to create a platform for dialogue between a theoretically oriented, empirically grounded anthropology, and an anthropology directly applied to development and social change.

In the recent decade two somewhat contradictory tendencies may be observed in the relationship between anthropology and development. On the one hand, anthropology has become increasingly marginalised in development debates, where macro-economic and political reforms rather than contextualised socially and culturally sensitive development interventions have been promoted. In the era of budget support and sector-wide approaches anthropologists have had hard time to find new ways of engaging in development. On the other hand, anthropological knowledge and perspectives are nowadays demanded by development agencies as, for instance, poverty and rights based approaches require socio-cultural analysis and understanding. The immediate implication of this is that today actors pay at least lip-service to anthropological approaches and perspectives.
Taken together these two tendencies reveal that despite important works produced by scholars inside and outside the APAD-network, anthropological knowledge and analysis are often referred to, but much less practically integrated in, development interventions. Yet at a time when the boundaries between development aid and public expenses are fuzzier than ever, anthropological analysis is badly needed to understand and, by extension, influence development and social change. While this seems to be largely accepted, today the main challenge is how and by what means anthropology may engage in development in practical and concrete ways, while respecting scientific rigor and methodological requirements.

Central questions that conference participants could address are: What are the prospects for engaging anthropology in major challenges of poverty, inequality, corruption, social fragmentation, violence and ethnic tensions? How and when should anthropologists be actively involved in development efforts, and political jumbles? What are the responsibilities of anthropology in studying social change? How can anthropology engage in public debate and development policy?

The Euro-African Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development (APAD) is firmly engaged in strengthening anthropological research on development issues. Over the years researchers have increasingly turned their attention away from a strict focus on development towards the study of the public space, decentralization, governance and civil society.

The issue of engagement has re-emerged as a key debate in anthropology as a whole. The theme of the 2010 APAD Conference in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, is a way to return to the issue of engaging anthropology in development and social change.

The conference will be organised around the following axes:

- **Anthropology and the ethics of engagement**: Development, politics and cultural exchange
- **Setting the agenda in engaged research**: Anthropology on public services, media, democratisation, decentralisation, and gender
- **Grassroots participation and personal engagement**: Anthropologists straddling between the public and the private
- **Narratives of development**: Integrating anthropology and history
- **Anthropological methods in development**: Ethnography, participation and the promotion of social change
- **Anthropological data and development agencies**: Combining research and development work
- **Public anthropology**: Engaging anthropology in public debate, policy and politics

APAD is a network promoting dialogue between African and European researchers in the social sciences, as well as with development agents. Initially devoted to the empirical studies of interactions brought about by development, APAD’s approach has evolved towards research regarding social change on the African continent in its broadest sense.

http://www.association-apad.org/
Practical information

Abstracts should not exceed 500 words and must be submitted before 1 April 2009 to the general secretariat of APAD at the African Studies Centre in Leiden at the following email address: apad@ascliden.nl

The full text is expected before 31 October 2009. APAD will have very limited funding for conference participants so it is recommended that participants find their own financial support to cover the costs of participating in the conference.

The conference fee will be announced later.

All conference participants will be invited to become APAD members. Membership fees should be paid to the general secretariat of APAD at the ASC in Leiden.

Membership rates are as follows:
Those on a monthly salary of more than €800: €39
Those on a monthly salary of less than €800: €19

Payment can be made by bank transfer ONLY to APAD’s bank account number: 48 29 57 352 in the name of ‘Afrika-Studiecentrum (APAD)’, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands. Code BIC: ABNANL2A, code IBAN: NL97ABNA0482957352

Conference information will be available on the APAD website as of the end of January 2009.

The Organizing Committee