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The Power in Development and Sociology

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Development needs more sociology, and sociological research needs to be more problem-solving oriented. The question is: how can critical sociology help re-shape not just public discourse on development, but also development policies?

Sociologists have identified, articulated, and analyzed unique solutions to underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality that have uplifted millions of people's livelihoods, capabilities, incomes, and dignity. These solutions have included: East Asian models of developmental states, global social democracy models across Europe and Latin America, social movements, revolutions, cooperatives, solidarity economies, and more recently the habitation economy. In this policy brief, I highlight three ways sociologists' development expertise is primed to make a transformational impact on development practice.

First, sociologists are well-trained and adept at exposing the *conditions* in which development solutions operate. Sociologists have shown the conditions under which developmental states succeed and fail; the conditions under which public institutions and social movements flourish; and the obstacles that can kill an institution or a social movement. As a result, sociologists are particularly adept at exposing the conditions needed to ensure that development projects succeed. For example, Peter Evans famously noted that only states that achieve the seemingly contradictory position of simultaneously being able to directly engage all classes of citizens, while also having full autonomy from all classes of citizens' political pressure can successfully ensure economic growth and redistribution. In this vein, sociologists can articulate "how to" attain the conditions necessary for upliftment and "how to" avoid the obstacles to attaining the conditions for success.

Second, sociologists offer a *unique methodology* with which to implement development solutions. Economics offers randomized control trials, which ensure high levels of expert and technical legitimacy. Philosophy offers effective altruism, which legitimizes consolidated wealth at the individual level. But sociology offers ethnography, interviews, participant observation, and qualitative surveys, which in turn ensure *popular legitimacy*. By exposing, hearing, and seeing what is happening on the ground, sociologists are able to examine how different actors are differentially seeing and experiencing the same phenomena. Sociologists can articulate what different actors want, expose what kinds of politics are actually occurring on the ground, and identify why a certain development project is not working. These insights give voice to people directly experiencing a project, which in turn yields a popular legitimacy that is key to ensuring that a particular development intervention is tried and tested to its

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fullest potential. Without popular legitimacy, development projects can fail before they begin.

Finally, sociologists' biggest comparative advantage is our ability to critically identify the true sources of a development problem in the first place. We must use this skill to help solve development problems. One of sociology's greatest strengths is its ability to identify and expose the mechanisms through which both overt and subtle forms of *power* operate. By doing so, sociologists have shown who loses and also who benefits from a particular system and have thus usefully exposed why even harmful systems continue despite the plethora of well-intentioned and highly resourced development projects that have been tried. Sociologists trace where power extends to, and where it fails to reach. We explain when, how, and why particular forms of power emerged and when, how, and why they fell. And finally, we explain how power is produced and reproduced over time and across geographies.

These strengths are well-illustrated by sociologists of gender, who have explained why standard development projects aiming to improve gender equity repeatedly fail. It is not enough to simply build more girls' schools or add breast cancer screening clinics in a village. These projects, which gender sociologists sharply term "add women and stir" have failed to understand the patriarchal power dynamics within the household and the community that prevents girls from attending school and forbids women from visiting a health-care clinic in the first place. To ensure that girls' schools and reproductive health technologies are actually used, development models must also attend to breaking patriarchal hierarchies within the private sphere of the household. Doing so is difficult, as it means taking away the power that some people (including men and older women) gain from those hierarchies.

Similarly, sociologists of East Asia explained that building a developmental state requires more than simple state capacity building exercises through meritocratic public institutions. We must also expose the various nodes of power that enable developmental states to succeed. For example, sociologists have underscored that only states powerful enough to discipline capital and suppress the landed elite have realized successful developmental states, as found in South Korea. Sociologists also have shown that only nations that attain the power to articulate an alternative model and resist the U.S.'s hegemonic model of neoliberal development models have succeeded. Indeed, Japan's rising economic power during the 1980s enabled it to work with the East Asian division of the World Bank to put forth a state-centered model of development in South Korea, while African countries lacked such outside support and were forced to take on structural adjustment loans as a result. Sociologists have shown that historical contexts matter. The power of North Korea's Communist threat during the 1960s and 1970s, forced the U.S. to fund education and land reform in South Korea, which in turn ensured South Korea's redistributive developmental state. In contrast, the U.S. refused such redistributive support in other developing countries, even punishing those who tried to enact redistributive measures themselves. Finally, sociologists have explained the impact of social movement power to assert the voices of marginalized actors. Although

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labor and gender movements were violently repressed by South Korea's developmental state during the 1970s and 1980s, these movements succeeded in forcing the state to expand its redistributive policies.

Finally, sociologists of global social democracy models have shown that it is not enough to simply note that social movements or revolutions are required to institute a welfare state or to pressure a state to enact more redistributive policies. To ensure that social movements arise and push forth redistributive policies in other contexts, we must also understand what forces of power catalyze social movements to emerge in the first place and what forms of power social movements can entail. As Karl Polanyi demonstrated, excessive state power from above will catalyze social movements that aim to protect citizens from below, whether these movements arise from the left *or* the right. Indeed, our current moment is showing these effects in practice as right-wing movements are gaining popular support across country contexts. Therefore, the real problem that sociologists can help solve is how development policies can dissuade states from squeezing their populations so hard. Through ethnographic methods, sociologists can also help development practitioners understand people's experiences with present realities and ensure that inclusive social movements win over those based on exclusion and vilification of marginalized minorities.

Development projects are becoming increasingly piecemeal, heterogenous, and non-government oriented. This has led to both "good" and "bad" projects with little accountability. To strengthen development efforts, sociologists must use their skills in unearthing the sources of power that contemporary development projects rely on and turn these insights into problem-solving approaches. Sociologists must examine how we can address new-found power sources—who holds them? Where are they vulnerable? Where do they not reach?

Understanding the sources, actors, and forms of power shaping development are key to not only identifying development problems, but also offering transformational solutions to development. The next step will be for sociologists to turn their skills toward a problem-solving orientation and for development practitioners to invite discussions with more sociologists.