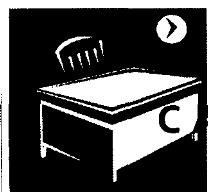

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Anthropology in International Development

DEBORAH RUBIN, DEBORAH CARO AND
DEBORAH CAHALEN

Recent interest in "public anthropology" has reopened a discussion about the role of anthropology outside of the academy. A central tension in the debate is how to distinguish, if at all, public anthropology from other forms of applied anthropology (May 2000 *AN*, p 9; Sept 2000 *AN*, p 6). One useful distinction is between research primarily intended to inform theory and research aimed at helping people make better decisions; we label the latter "policy-relevant research." Another distinction is with explicitly value-led actions intended to address and to end exploitation and oppression, sometimes referred to as *praxis*.

Lying somewhere between, and often intersecting with "policy-relevant research" and "praxis," is the everyday work of many anthropologists employed in international development institutions. Rarely able to carry out individual research and often at odds with some of the values of the institutions that employ them, these anthropologists use their training to inform local-level encounters with the "development process" and its policies as project officers, technical advisors, and increasingly as senior administrators managing multimillion-dollar activities.

Working in the Policy Arena

Academic and policy environments differ greatly, particularly in work environment and expected outcomes. Garrett Menning, Business Development Services Adviser at USAID, said that in contrast to the rewards for individual accomplishments in academics, "The work culture at USAID . . . stresses collaboration and the ability to work on a range of different problems. In a typical month, I may work with consultants doing contract work for our office, the staff of NGOs receiving USAID grants, professors carrying out case studies of AID projects, AID personnel at overseas missions, and employees of USDA or the State Department. I deal with issues ranging from the promotion of Internet access among poor entrepreneurs in South America to the impact of HIV/AIDS on business training programs in South Africa."

Work in government institutions necessitates serious attention to budget allocations and restrictions set by Congress, as well as policy agendas of NGOs and government agencies. While academics benefit from knowledge of these issues since they affect funding opportunities, policy workers cannot forego an understanding of current Congressional activities. For example, at USAID specific topics such as child survival, infectious diseases or basic education receive specific dollar earmarks from Congress that cannot be used by other programs. These political funding constraints have significantly shaped staffing patterns and development policy within USAID. Mary Willis (U of Nebraska-Lincoln) spent time preparing materials while working at USAID to "substantiate the need for maintaining and supplementing population and family planning funding." Each year, she documented the "cultural relevance of the particular project to each community," linking accomplishments to budget levels. Drafting one-page briefs to Congress to defend specific activities is a common responsibility in policy work. The value of a policy position for Deborah Cahalen is "not only working with a particular project's budget to try to get the best effects for the stakeholders, but also bringing insights to the table at a higher level, where funding priorities are set. What's really interesting to me right now is turning an anthropological eye to the policy process itself."

The need to get clearance on all written products is another difference between the academic and policy settings. Deborah Rubin supported two offices at USAID in an intergovernmental project to draft guidelines on poverty reduction. Each sentence was reviewed and revised by many individuals across the agency to ensure that the result was acceptable to US policy. Scientific expertise often takes a backseat to political concerns during the clearance process, as other policy makers may view science as "just another interest group," rather than a dependable source of knowledge.

The pace of work required in international development is another critical difference. Though people can attempt to be forward-looking through well-designed programs, those in policy and program work often need to address issues at crisis points, with no leeway in response time. Academics can wait for the luxury of hindsight in their research on issues and programs, and are not usually expected to construct a policy or program to fix the problem. As Garrett Menning puts it, "Academic anthropologists offer passionate and often damning critiques of the inequities of global capitalist development and the failures of existing development aid to alleviate world poverty, but few concrete suggestions for realistic solutions."

Translating anthropological knowledge into policy statements can be difficult. Anthropologists who chose the policy path must be prepared to write briefly and persuasively, a departure from the academic norms of extensive analysis. Lynellyn Long, Chief of Mission for the International Or-

Nancy Lurie

ganization for Migration in Bosnia-Herzegovina, said, "Anthropologists have great tools to work on public policy issues," but that "many graduate programs could do more in preparing anthropologists to participate in these circles by helping young anthropologists learn how to translate research findings into policy-relevant discourse and formats. I was lucky with my own advisers—they didn't think a one-minute sound bite was ridiculous, but an opportunity to make an important point. They focused on good concise analysis and taught me to avoid jargon."

Anthropological Contributions

Anthropologists who choose applied or public work often are better prepared than most to construct those realistic solutions, having the benefit not only of research experience in developing countries, but also of personal contacts with struggling communities. Knowledge of ethnographic content of a particular community often is the most valuable kind of expertise anthropologists offer. A second important contribution of anthropologists is the ability to gather information from a wide range of people and in varied contexts through participant observation, informal and formal interviewing, and cross-cultural communication. Andrew Wolfe used both his skills and ethnographic expertise in a team effort among USAID, the Mozambican government and international donors to strengthen the early warning system for floods in Mozambique, working with river basin residents to determine how they gained knowledge about coming floods. He realized that residents did not have full access to information about critical structural changes in the basin, like dams upstream from South Africa. Wolfe noted that, "We learned that major flooding events of the past are given local names, and unless the magnitude of a flood is clearly specified in the warning, residents will respond through the prism of collective memory, which is inadequate in the case of a 'flood of record.'"

Perhaps the most important contribution to the policy process is the ability of many anthropologists to contextualize a particular issue or population they may be researching within a wider frame of reference. This remains the most difficult of skills to convey to non-anthropological audiences. Marion Pratt captures some of this in describing her work in drafting guidelines and preparing training materials. She said, "The challenge remains to encourage AID staff and our partners to design and implement initiatives that are culturally relevant, gender-sensitive and environmentally sound in a fast-paced, confusing and sometimes dangerous context."

Entering the Policy Arena

Unlike the academic job market, there are many positions for both direct and indirect hires in international development. These provide a challenging arena for anthropologists, one where they can benefit developing communities in today's increasingly interconnected world. Some anthropologists choose to become independent consultants, an option that can offer greater flexibility and choice of projects. Because agencies such as USAID and many NGOs and development companies contract out most of their technical work, consulting can be well-paying and provide plenty of international research opportunities.

For anthropologists just starting out in policy work, there are fellowships available for those at all careers levels. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Diplomacy Fellowship Program places PhD scientists into USAID, the State Department, USDA, NSF and NIH (www.aaas.org). The Public Health Institute, a consortium of health research organizations, administers the Population Leadership Program (www.phi.org), which places senior technical advisers in reproductive health in USAID overseas missions and in Washington, DC. ■

Deborah Rubin and Deborah Caro are co-directors of Cultural Practice LLC, a consulting company that provides knowledge about cultural systems and international development interventions. Rubin was an AAAS fellow (1997-99) at USAID. Caro was a Population Leadership Fellow (1995-98) at USAID. ***Deborah Cahalen****, who was an AAAS Fellow (2000-01) at the Dept of Agriculture, is now the Democracy and Human Rights Policy Officer for East Asia at the US Dept of State.*