

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Rethinking Development Work

By Heather Grady

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BOOKS

Rethinking Development Work

REVIEW BY HEATHER GRADY

The first five chapters of Adam D. Kiš's new book, *The Development Trap: How Thinking Big Fails the Poor*, read as a manifesto to convince those working in international development that poverty will never be eradicated. Lest such readers despair, the last three chapters call for the continued fight against global poverty. Kiš's ultimate purpose is to "retool the motivation behind the work that development practitioners and scholars do."

Kiš has crafted a densely argued, thought-provoking tome that reflects his deep experience working at the front lines of the development industry. It's refreshing to hear from someone who has direct experience with developing communities, international NGOs, and official development agencies, in different regions of the world. Most popular development writers, to the shame of the literature, have never lived in the countries they write about.

Kiš, an anthropologist by training, fills his book with real, informative vignettes. He even includes a chapter on culture—a subject typically avoided by development writers. The phrase "culture eats strategy for lunch" reminds us that culture so shapes how humans and institutions behave over time that it cannot be ignored. He writes intelligently and respectfully about fatalism, resilience, and the idea of "limited good"—the notion common in some traditional societies that good things are finite and zero-sum. Outsiders often dismiss these perspectives as impediments to poverty alleviation, but they are adaptive responses to the challenging environments in which people live.

He rightly condemns the notion that rising GDP is the recipe for eradicating poverty and achieving broader human development. He cites the famous *Voices of the Poor* study by the World Bank that uniquely documented



**THE DEVELOPMENT TRAP:
How Thinking Big Fails the Poor**

By Adam D. Kiš
190 pages, Routledge, 2018

real development challenges and solutions on a vast scale. It emphasized the importance of voice, agency, and empowerment of impoverished people that, in most contexts, are essential ingredients to a sustained end to poverty. By contrast, most development programs de-emphasize funding to support empowerment strategies because of the added short-term costs of participatory processes.

In a chapter titled "The Perversion of Idealism," Kiš strikes at the core problem of funding for development, whether from official government sources or philanthropy: Whoever receives the funds to do the work is generally more accountable to the funder than they are to those they are trying to assist. The dynamic creates enormous distortions because the quality control normally associated with being the consumer of products and services doesn't exist. Beneficiaries, end-users, and community members we're supposed to serve have little or no voice in the funding decisions.

"The uneven playing field creates the need for development, but also simultaneously opens up avenues for the dominance of development implementers' interests," he writes. "It's a tricky Catch-22 with no easy solution."

Kiš wants to tear down the very notion of ending poverty for two reasons: He doesn't believe it will happen, and he concludes that

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such unrealistic idealism undermines the otherwise positive results that the development field can achieve. In the more optimistic turn of the book's later chapters, he recommends aid that supports "permanent, irreversible good," such as feeding children whose development will suffer without proper nutrition, funding education and capacity building, and "nudging" communities in the right direction to create circumstances where the right behavioral choices can be made. He urges funders and practitioners to embrace complexity in their work. His points are sound, but not novel.

Kiš fails to mention some of the great development thinkers and writers who inform and critique mainstream development practice. Most notable is Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (his classic *Development as Freedom* was published almost two decades ago), and a younger generation of writers such as Duncan Green of Oxfam in his book *How Change Happens*. Kiš repeatedly cites writers like Jeffrey Sachs, William Easterly, and Dambisa Moyo, whose works are important mainstream reads but represent only a thin slice of what anyone engaged in development should be required to read.

Despite these oversights, this is a useful book for anyone who is entering the field of development, doing a short-term stint to help out in foreign lands, or working in government or philanthropy to provide support internationally. His recommendation that we focus on creating opportunities and expanding choices, just as Sen has argued for decades, is sound. We should measure progress not by the eradication of income poverty but through multidimensional measures, just as the Human Development Index, Sustainable Development Goals, and Social Progress Imperative do. Though he doesn't cite these alternatives, his proposals are aligned with them.

Kiš ends by returning to his title: Big thinking fails the poor. He urges us to remember that context is crucial and that one-size-fits-all approaches tend to fail. He and many others have witnessed it firsthand again and again. It remains to be seen whether today's funders will heed his call. ■