



Book Review: The Politics of Development

Sithandiwe Mujuru

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Mcloughlin, C., Ali, S., Xie, K., Cheeseman, C., and Hudson, D. E., (2024). [*The Politics of Development*](#). Sage.

A book review by Sithandiwe Mujuru

The notion that politics matters for development is not new. [*The Politics of Development*](#) takes this critical line of thought, illustrating how and why development is inherently political, and what this implies for policy and practice.

The editors define the politics of development as the '**unavoidable process of contestation over alternative desired futures**' that is shaped among other things by the interaction of a diversity of interests, goals and identities, the struggle over limited resources, deeply entrenched inequalities, uneven power relations, and colonial legacies (p.7). One of the key messages of the book, which strongly resonates with the essence of TWP, is that there is a **need to apply a political mindset to development processes** and that, if we explicitly recognise that everything about development is political, we can better understand how development happens and why, and in whose interests.

At a time when development practitioners continue to struggle with how to tackle pressing challenges like the energy transition, conflict, and inequality, more effectively, the book offers a useful way to analyse the political dynamics that underlie them.

The *three 'I's of Development - Institutions, Interests and Ideas* constitute the framework that lies at the heart of the book. This framework will resonate with those who are familiar with [political economy analysis and the thinking component of TWP](#), with its emphasis on institutions, actors, and the incentives, interests and ideas that shape their dynamic interaction.

Using examples from different parts of the world, the book shows how:

- **Institutions**, both formal and informal, can be interpreted differently within societies and can influence people's behaviour, with important implications for development outcomes.
- The pursuit of narrow and segmented **interests** undermines the achievement of the collective public good and desired collective futures.
- **Ideas** shape interests and institutions, influence how people think the rules should work or look like, and/or can be used to frame contestation processes over who gets what, when and how.

The Politics of Development is written in clear and accessible language, in textbook form. Using the three 'I's framework, it provides great analytical depth and practical insights that help to

illustrate the ways in which development is messy, contested and inherently political. All the chapters — ranging from the conceptual foundations underlying the book's framework to the role of government, the market and social actors in promoting change, to issues related to identity, inequality and exclusion, violent conflict, sustainability, legitimacy, and corruption — provide a series of reflective questions which enable the reader to connect with the topic, reflect on their own positionality and analyse their assumptions about how change can happen. The different contributions also use examples from diverse contexts around the world, exploring contemporary settings as well as historical ones.

One of the topics that stood out for me in the book is the importance of **decolonising development**. Chapter 2 on '*Whose knowledge Counts? Global inequalities, knowledge production and the need for decolonisation*', by Zenobia Ismail, emphasises the need to recognise the voices of the most marginalised, pay attention to new ideas and change the way we think on the basis of that. Ismail highlights why it is so essential to unpack how colonial and hegemonic structures of power continue to facilitate contemporary inequalities and to reflect on how these highly unequal structures can be tackled more effectively.

The *Politics of Development* encourages its audience to adopt a more people-centred focus to development by understanding that people have different lived experiences that are shaped, among other things, by colonial legacies, scarcity of resources, power structures, and a diversity of ideas, values, interests and incentives.

From students of development studies to development practitioners, this book can help us make sense of some of the critical questions in our world today.

You can also hear more about the book from the editors themselves in this episode of the [People, Power and Politics Podcast](#) with Claire Mcloughlin, Nic Cheeseman and David Hudson.

About the author

Sithandiwe Mujuru is the TWP CoP Programme and Communications Officer. She holds a master's degree in International Development – Governance and State Building from the University of Birmingham and was the 2018 recipient of the Mo Ibrahim Scholarship for African Governance.

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The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the International Development Department at University of Birmingham.

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