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### Introduction: engaging critically from theory to policy and implementation

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# Introduction: engaging critically from theory to policy and implementation

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At the 2011 Association of American Geographers' (AAG) Annual Meeting we convened a panel to explore and debate the role of academics in development implementation and policy. The enthusiasm for the topic from both panelists and the audience was heartening, and the resultant symposium publication in *Environment and Planning A* proved provocative.<sup>1</sup> While contributions to the conference sessions and published symposium laid bare the challenges associated with academic engagement in development policy and practice, they did not address *how* critical scholars might engage in a manner productive for both scholarship and implementation and policy.

This question we tackled in a second symposium, held at the 2013 AAG Annual Meeting. We brought together academics who have worked around the edges of large donors as grantees or external advisors, academics who have been on the staff of donor and development organisations and current employees of USAID, the world's largest bilateral donor, to explore how such engagements might work. What emerged was a fascinating narrative that, at one level, raised practical opportunities to work together in a manner that is critical, rigorous and likely to have an impact in the world. These ranged from donor-side motivations and opportunities for engagement that open a space for academia to help frame and answer key development questions (see the contributions of Cook and Elwell, and McCusker), opportunities academics have to frame such engagement in a manner consonant with existing academic reward and incentive systems, and the responsibility academics have to engage where we can (see the contributions of Sultana and O'Reilly).

At another level the conversation moved beyond the surface of our guiding question to problematise the implicit siting of critical thought and engagement on one side of this presumed divide, and indeed questioned the divide itself (see the contribution of Bebbington). This conversation reopens a door to a development past that is often elided as a result of frequently strongly held views among academics, donors and implementers about each other. In development's formative period during and following World War II the paucity of skills and experience relevant to the very different conditions existing in the former colonial and soon-to-be-former colonial world meant that expertise of any sort was

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at a premium. Several development ‘pioneers’ gained their reconstruction and development expertise during the Marshall Plan era in western Europe and then spent periods abroad undertaking research and/or consultancy and advising new, capacity-challenged governments.<sup>2</sup> They then commonly took university jobs or helped establish and staff nascent international agencies within the United Nations or Bretton Woods systems. Some continued to move back and forth, or to consult from university backgrounds, or to teach from practitioner contexts in ways that were never questioned as they have been more recently.<sup>3</sup> The separation between academia and the donor–implementer world that today seems rooted in a long history is, in fact, a recent and global North-specific artifact (as Bebbington discusses below), probably reflecting the devalorisation of engaged scholarship in the face of increasing specialisation, institutionalisation and pressures upon university academics in Europe and North America to obtain funded research and to publish or perish.

The contributions to this symposium trace both of these themes, looking for opportunities to work together and move beyond a binary that need not separate the ideas, efforts and goals of those interested in development, wherever they may be situated.

### Notes on Contributors

David Simon is Professor of Development Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. He writes widely on development-environment issues, development thinking, and cities and climate change.

Edward R Carr is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of South Carolina and Director of the Humanitarian Response and Development Lab (HURDL). His research interests, which are situated at the intersection of development and adaptation to global change, focus on finding ways to meet the shifting needs of vulnerable populations in the context of a changing global environment.

### Notes

1. Simon et al., “Geographers and/in Development.”
2. See, for example, Chenery and Seers, *Pioneers in Development*.
3. Simon, *Fifty Key Thinkers on Development*.

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