Development, Well-being and Perceptions of the ‘Expert’ in Ladakh, North-West India

Andrea Butcher

Abstract: In Ladakh, north-west India, a popular narrative of the region’s inhabitants as spiritually and ecologically enlightened combines with national sustainable and participatory development policies to produce a distinctive character that underpins the local administration’s development strategies. These strategies emphasise ‘traditional’ values of cooperation, simplicity, and ecological and spiritual harmony as the way to achieve culturally sustainable development and emotional well-being. However, obstacles to development appear when normative principles of sustainability and ecological wisdom encounter local cosmology, hierarchy and perceptions of expertise in society. In this article, I reflect upon my fieldwork and previous regional ethnographies to consider possible frameworks for evaluating well-being as an indicator of culturally sustainable development that include concepts of cosmology and expert protection.

Keywords: Buddhism, cosmology, expert, Ladakh, sustainable development, well-being

Expert Protection

Like other areas of the Global South, Ladakh – a mountainous high-altitude desert in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) – is a region undergoing rapid transformation. Nevertheless, popular literature constructs Ladakh as the quintessential model of cultural preservation and sustainable development due to its majority Buddhist demographic, with lessons that the rest of the world would do well to learn (e.g. Norberg-Hodge 1991). Development authorities in Ladakh’s Leh District have appropriated this construct as the foundational principle for their vision of development practice. This vision is based upon a development ideology normative to liberal democracies foregrounding undifferentiated social identities, claims to individual agency and rational resource management. This obscures indigenous perceptions of cosmology, hierarchy and the ritual mediation of a vital geography, all of which are crucial to the successes of worldly activities. Thus, the outcome or success of development projects can be compromised by assumptions of a neutral, undifferentiated community identity and expertise not shared by target populations. Bound up in this quandary are considerations of well-being: what is required to live well.

According to global governance frameworks, the right to development is considered to be a human universal. Development as a translocal process, however, does not behave as predicted in the encounters it has once on the move. Whilst innovations in transportation, information networks and technical reach have shrunk human geographies, as Arjun Appadurai notes (1996: 29) we cannot expect ‘complete synchrony with the referential world’ that gave birth to international development, its ideology and delivery. Similarly, Anna Tsing (2005) emphasises that whilst the cultural flows of capitalism and politics (which form the bedrock of development as governance in contemporary orthodoxy) depend on global connections to be fulfilled, they are ‘a particular kind of universality: [they] can only be charged and enacted in the sticky materiality of practical encounters’ (ibid.: 1). Here, I contribute to research foregrounding heterogeneity
of development as practical encounter by considering perceptions of cosmology and ‘the expert’ in Ladakh, and how the skills attached to expert identities are called upon – by the people they service – to heal, to guide, to restore and to protect. Whilst the techniques the experts employ to perform these services differ, I argue that the protection received through expert performance forms part of what is required to achieve feelings – and indicators – of well-being.

The evidence for this article is taken from field research carried out over 16 months from 2009 to 2012 for my doctoral thesis, in which I examined the impact of Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice upon development intervention in the region. This means that the account is speculative rather than a presentation of the results of an applied exercise, or a reflection of collaborative partnerships with development agencies in Ladakh. The discussion that follows is not based upon a systematic methodology that had well-being at the centre; rather I retrofit well-being indicators to the data with a focus on notions of protection and expertise. This is not without aim: I intend this retrospective reflection to form the basis of future research that is more applied in approach.

The Field

A former Buddhist kingdom, Ladakh now forms part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), having been absorbed into the Indian Union at independence in 1947. The region itself is divided into the two districts of Leh and Kargil, with predominant Buddhist and Muslim populations respectively. I conducted my research in the Buddhist-dominated Leh district, which has religious, ethnic and linguistic links to Tibet.

Ladakh’s economy prior to 1947 was principally agrarian in the lower lands to the west and pastoral in the high plateau of the north-east (herding yaks and goats). A harsh mountain terrain meant meagre returns on agricultural production needed to be supplemented by a significant – if modest – network of trade with Kashmir to the west and Yarkhand to the east, although Buddhist households were required to produce an agricultural surplus to support the monasteries in exchange for ritual services. Whilst the endeavour to improve and modernise Ladakh began in the early twentieth century, development as a system of planned management based on socialist and welfarist approaches to development was introduced when the region was absorbed into the Indian Union in 1947. State-led development and modernisation programmes transformed Ladakh’s economy through improvements in communications, transport and education (Van Beek 1996: 215). Changes in governance models removed the legal requirement to offer patronage to monastic rulers, although families continue to sponsor religious rites aimed at protecting the well-being of their households today – a crucial point to note as will be shown. Material upliftment improved indicators of well-being measured using objective markers of progress: modernisation, an education based upon European or North American models, and the ability to participate in a cash economy.

From the 1980s onwards, development ideology in Ladakh shifted from the need for extensive state intervention to improve well-being indicators, to one whereby local traditional values were not only celebrated but deemed essential if the region was to retain its self-sufficiency, cultural foundations and feelings of security. This coincided with the abandonment of welfarist development models, the adoption of economic liberalisation by successive national governments and an increasing global endorsement for development policies aimed to foster greater grassroots participation in development planning. Despite the changes occurring, Ladakh’s harsh environment meant the opportunities for large-scale development projects were limited, and this may have positively influenced Ladakh’s portrayal in the popular imagination as the quintessential model of material self-sufficiency, and of social and spiritual harmony. Helena Norberg-Hodge’s development critique Ancient Futures (1991) was instrumental in legitimising this construction. In Norberg-Hodge’s assessment, well-being and feelings of security are determined by the relationship ‘Buddhist’ Ladakhis have with the land and themselves: self-sufficiency in agriculture, networks of social and familial support, democratic decision-making processes, and egalitarian social structures. Here, well-being is achieved through the maintenance of strong social networks and personal ties. Nevertheless, the associations remain normative to the liberal democratic experience of social progress, which sidelines particular kinds of value, expertise and phenomena crucial to the maintenance of conditions necessary for security and protection to be experienced.

Well-being

The focus upon well-being as an indicator of appropriate or successful development represents a shift
from objective metrics towards attempts to measure subjective associations. In its Development Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways project, the Department for U.K. International Development (DFID) states that ‘Wellbeing has caught the attention of policy makers and practitioners because it offers new perspectives on what matters and new ways to assess policy outcomes and their impact on people’s lives’. So crucial has the concept of wellbeing as an indicator of successful development become that DFID and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the U.K. have financed interdisciplinary research projects that examine the role or importance of wellbeing indicators: for example the ESRC-funded Wellbeing Research in Developing Countries (WeD) at Bath University (2002–2007) and the Imperial College Conservation Science’s (ICCS) Measuring Complex Outcomes of Environment and Development Interventions (part of the ESRC-DFID joint fund for poverty alleviation research). As Laura Camfield et al. (2009: 7) emphasise: ‘research into wellbeing and subjective experiences in developing countries is growing rapidly, and represents a paradigm shift towards holistic, person-centred, and dynamic understandings of people’s lives, which are nonetheless embedded in particular sociocultural contexts’.

WeD identifies three interdependent components in their explanation of wellbeing: the material or objective, the subjective and relational. All three interact in conceptions of satisfaction that include value systems and activities required to fulfil feelings of security and/or social success: the ability to support and care for household members in the correct manner, to share hospitality with neighbours, to access networks of support, to make a good marriage – ‘not simply individual preferences, but values grounded in a broader, shared understanding of how the world is and should be […] a moral sense of feeling at ease in the world’ (White 2010: 160). The ICCS project’s webpage describes how the concept of wellbeing provides a multidimensional and more holistic approach: ‘incorporating qualitative elements may be more illuminating, and puts local people at the centre of decision-making […]’. Wellbeing entails not only objective circumstances such as material assets, but also the individual’s subjective interpretation of them.11

These definitions emphasise the subjective accounts of wellbeing that exist in a relationship with the objective indicators specifying material entitlements, for example access to a cash economy or sources of credit, livelihood opportunities and commodities. The focus upon subjective requirements, however, indicates a move to take seriously experiences and evaluations of how to live well – how to be well – that are ‘shaped by development recipients’ perception of their environment and themselves in the context of what they value and aspire to’ (Camfield et al. 2009: 8).

In the context of development policy as a universal, wellbeing forms part of the evaluation and planning toolkit, despite emphasis upon subjective experience. It is here that anthropology can contribute to analysis of development, both empirically and theoretically, as a particular kind of universality enacted in practical encounters. It can do this by asking how to ascribe qualitative meaning to the kinds of information that wellbeing as an evaluative tool aims to capture.

Anthropologists have largely been silent on the subject of wellbeing. Reasons for this are levied at anthropology’s disciplinary habitus and its emphasis upon uncovering and interpreting emic (ethnographic) categories of cultural meaning, rather than relying on etic (analytical) ones. Anthropologists are concerned that ‘wellbeing’ – an externally defined category – falls into the latter (Mathews and Izquierdo 2010: 10). There may also be concern that, if not careful, a non-reflexive application of ‘wellbeing’ may inspire cultural relativist celebrations of the ‘traditional’, which can lead to the upholding of oppressive power structures of traditional elites.

Such bounded conceptions of culture have been replaced by approaches that acknowledge the traffic in cultural and material capital (e.g. Appadurai 1996), or the productive, heterogeneous and often unpredictable outcomes of global interaction (e.g. Tsing 2005). In corroboration, Mathews and Izquierdo have attempted an anthropological definition of wellbeing that is useful for interpreting localised experiences of development implementation and how it is received: ‘Wellbeing is experienced by individuals – its essential locus lies within individual subjectivity – but it may be considered and compared interpersonally and interculturally, since all individuals live within particular worlds of others’ (2010: 5).

If wellbeing comes to people in the form of international policy and development delivery that bring with them new opportunities for material prosperity, detailed on-the-ground ethnography can provide the social and cultural contextualisation, without which wellbeing in a given society cannot be fully understood (ibid.: 250). Before I consider the benefits for the applied project, I will first convey the problem at hand: assumptions of social organisation, cooperation and expert identities in Ladakh’s development administration.
Development Discourse, Projects and Strategies

Whilst Norberg-Hodge’s reification of Ladakh – introduced above – has been criticised for its tendency to gloss over the historical context of extreme material hardship, class-ridden abuse and a genuine desire for material upliftment amongst Ladakhis (Nawang Tsering 1994: 46; Van Beek 1996, 1999, 2000), the popularity of Norberg-Hodge’s ‘counter-development’ thesis has been appropriated by Leh’s development and administration prompting considerable external interest and attracting institutional support, ‘ecotourism’ enterprises, and – ironically, given her thesis – the precious flows of cash that they bring. Nevertheless, the assumptions of self-sufficiency, non-stratified social identities and networks of cooperation indicated in her account have ramifications for the type of development privileged by Leh District’s development sector.

Ownership

Rural development activities in the Indian Union are based upon: five year micro-level planning (MLP) programmes intended to foster the participation of villages in designing sustainable rural development; and the 2005 National Rural Employment Generation Act (NREGA), an initiative aimed at improving rural livelihoods by guaranteeing rural households 100 days’ waged employment per financial year. Leh District was granted autonomy in matters of development with the inauguration of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in September 1995, a form of devolved government formed in response to Ladakhis’ requests for greater autonomy in political and development matters due to the region’s distinct cultural, linguistic, geographic and religious identity. Development priorities are agreed at MLP workshops, implemented at village, or panchayat, level by the Hill Council (in collaboration with the Tata Institute of Social Science [TISS]), and supported by rural-development NGOs. These planning sessions consist of three-day workshops involving participatory exercises, survey questionnaires and input sessions on key themes of development, which are then used to identify key improvements and projects. The aim is to create a sense of ownership for development amongst the recipients.

As well as assisting with the delivery of national rural-development policy, Leh District’s NGO sector manages projects funded by overseas organisations that integrate ecological and energy sustainability with food security, health benefits and income-generation programmes. Overseas organisations build capacities and distribute resources amongst local NGOs that have less technical experience but whose employees have a stronger relationship with, and more intimate knowledge of, the final ‘beneficiary’. NGO personnel cast themselves in the role of facilitators, building capacities at village level so the villagers can take responsibility for their development:

The idea is to build capacity at grassroots level, to allow the villages to plan for their future development. The villagers don’t have much money so they lack power. They do have the ability to make decisions however, so the idea is to empower them to do that. The top [the Hill Council; the State and Central governments] are beginning to recognise that they [the villagers] should be the agents of their own development (MLP Coach, Interview Transcript, 20 January 2010).

NGO ideology stipulates that local participation and ownership are essential if the projects are to be successful and sustainable. The projects are intended to be owned and managed by the recipients themselves, and the establishing of village-level committees, mobilised to manage education or energy programmes, is frequently a key project deliverable. That projects be owned and managed at grassroots level was stated by the former Director of one of Ladakh’s pioneering development NGOs:

I think almost all of the NGOs have a strong focus on people’s participation. I think that’s across all NGOs […]. And we definitely, definitely make sure that the people participate. Otherwise it doesn’t make sense for us to go drop something in the village and come back […] and once these things are put in place the ownership is immediately transferred to the local community; we play the role of a support organisation, building capacities, and they totally run it (Interview Transcript, 3 January 2011).

Sustainability

Leh District’s development sector expresses a commitment to delivering development that is environmentally and culturally sustainable, building upon traditional support networks at grassroots level. Both national rural-development policy and Norberg-Hodge’s narrative are visible in the Hill Council’s vision document of where Ladakh wants to be in 2025, in which the Council commits to environmentally and culturally sustainable development:

Ladakh 2025 envisages a ‘people-centered’ [sic] approach to development. This would require people’s institutions at various levels of decision-making and a participatory approach to the planning process (Ladakh Vision Document 2025: 4).
Ladakh was traditionally an egalitarian society, where peace and social justice were accorded a higher status than economic prosperity. Ethics were upheld in everyday life. People cooperated with each other and lived in harmony with their natural surroundings (ibid.: 60).

A cursory glance over NGO mission statements highlights the collective concern to protect traditional values and culture from development, ensuring sustainability through traditional methods of cooperation and the use of appropriate technology:

The concept of sustainable development would base [sic] on the holistic approach for utilisation of natural resources such as land, water, vegetation and livestock of the villages integrating with the age old traditions and cultures in order to counter the negative effects of the modern development on Ladakh's social values, culture and tradition (PR Material, Ladakh Environment and Health Organisation).

These passages echo the definitions of well-being discussed above: a related set of requirements for maintaining subjective associations (traditional values of democratic decision-making, cooperation, and social and environmental harmony) that allow for the objective indicators (self-sufficiency, sustainability, environmental balance, freedom from conflict) to be met. The assumption is that villagers are identifying development priorities based upon a strong association with the pre-identified ‘cultural values’ that ensure culturally appropriate development, thus enhancing indicators of well-being.

**Project Evaluation and Recipient Indifference**

Projects are often met with recipient indifference when the experts depart, and project efficacy comes under criticism from both facilitators and recipients. Early enthusiasm and momentum prove limited once ownership has been transferred to the villagers (yulpa) and the facilitators have left the field. Reasons for this are often practical and relate to the proportion of project costs determined to be borne by the recipient. However, it is common to hear development personnel complain of a lack of motivation on the part of the villagers, especially when they are expected to take responsibility for the maintenance and repairs of technologies. NGO personnel express frustration when projects do not advance as anticipated; they lay blame at the feet of the villagers for not taking the initiative to improve their situations, despite having been handed the tools and shown how to use them. Unpublished reports from the 2010 MLP exercises (provided by TISS) and impact-evaluation seminars (e.g. GERES 2009) indicate that a lack of effective leadership at village level results in failure of yulpa to work together to maintain small-scale, sustainable technologies. For example, investigations into the determinants for success and failure of community-based micro hydroelectric projects (for which 25% of microhydel units had failed within five years of commission) concluded that the barriers were social and managerial rather than technical: plant failure occurred in villages where there was a lack of effective community leadership (ibid.: 33). One project coordinator blamed these tendencies on the irresponsibility of previous top-down methods of development delivery that encouraged dependency:

They [the village-level energy committees] always look for somebody above, always, always. If there is not anybody above then they don’t feel comfortable […] If we keep showing our face to them, the people will feel that this whole project belongs to [the NGO]. And this is their duty; they will manage it […] so this feeling should not be there. We are asking them to be independent (Interview Transcript, 18 May 2012).

Development personnel cite reasons for a lack of motivation to be increasing dependence on government subsidies, loss of self-sufficiency, and a greater focus on individual entitlement at the expense of a sense of village solidarity, stating that more education and awareness campaigns are needed to motivate yulpa to take responsibility for their development. Academic observers of Ladakh’s development encounter cite greater urbanisation, a reliance on a cash economy and the erosion of older participatory support networks as the reason for this apathy (Norberg-Hodge 1991; Van Beek 1999, 2000), or point to disjuncture between the expectations of the NGOs and those of the recipients (Van Beek 1999: 250; 2000: 250–266). The results of my own examination indicated that village Ladakhis feel underwhelmed by the productivity of small-scale projects, which are unable to provide big enough outputs to satisfy growing consumption of energy and material goods, or which require much individual input of cash and labour. A visit to Leh town can open one’s eyes to the desirable benefits of urban living (access to commodities, abundant electricity, prestigious jobs and the opportunity to meet or work with tourists) even when the negative impacts (unregulated construction, inefficient sewerage, poor waste disposal and increasingly unsanitary conditions) are a pronounced assault on the senses.
I wish to add to these already well-circulating critiques of development in Ladakh by considering the possibility that village institutions of ceremony and expertise may act as a further barrier to successful implementation. Here, one finds a little-examined area of Ladakh’s development encounter: ceremonial subjectivity, cosmological order, maintaining good relationships with chthonic deities and the position of the ‘expert’ in Ladakhi ritual governance.

Expertise, Social Hierarchy and Religious Cosmology

As stated above, development personnel expressed frustration that projects do not progress as anticipated, laying the blame at the feet of the villagers for not taking the initiative to improve their situations. For their part, villagers complained that projects are initiated but not maintained; expertise is not available if they experience technical difficulties, with the villagers expected to fix problems. There is little follow-up to make sure that project technologies are functioning or being utilised properly.

This set off investigative alarm bells. If the development model assumed a village inhabited by individuals of equivalent status working together to ensure the smooth functioning of social life in the traditional way, what was being overlooked? Was this an example of the increasing dependence lamented by development personnel? Or was it an indicator of assumptions of social organisation embedded within the development model? And if so, would this have ramifications for models of participatory development?

To consider further possible obstacles to the successes of sustainable development, I examined ethnographies of Himalayan Buddhist village life from the 1980s and 1990s. For this article, I draw upon evidence contained in two of these ethnographies below: Phylactou (1989) and Mills (2003). The aspects that I wish to emphasise are those related to the consideration of participation and cooperation on the one hand, and ownership and expertise on the other.

Participation and Cooperation

Maria Phylactou’s ethnography of a Buddhist Ladakhi village in the 1980s illustrates the character of participation and cooperation. Village and household organisations pool labour at specific times of the agricultural calendar: for example, Phylactou notes how in the spring villagers work together to repair irrigation canals, bridges and paths, with household cooperatives pooling supplies of labour, animals and tools when planting begins (1989: 190–191). Internal institutions such as the post of village head (goba), master of animals (lorapa) and supervisor of water rights (churpon) are rotated amongst households or groups of households for a period collectively agreed by the yulpa. However, Phylactou (1989: 192–193) also describes specific times when inter-household cooperation is restricted:

whilst labour is cooperative and interdependent when ploughing begins in the spring, these household groups only cooperate in spring. This is the time of year when the boundaries between households are least stressed either by ritual or the organisation of production’ (ibid.: 193; emphasis added). During harvest, each household is dependent on its own labour supply. When harvest is complete, household boundaries are closed. Individual estates sponsor rituals to purify the household and its temple, and to ask forgiveness of the supernatural inhabitants of mountains, soils and water for damage done to their homes during cultivation. Once the wealth has been replenished, households continue to participate as guests at feasts and wedding parties, or as members of p’aspon: a corporation of households sharing the same temple god, whose members step in to fulfil the ritual functions of member households. Participation in material production remains restricted until the following spring. Thus, Phylactou’s description calls into question the extent to which the village model is comprised of cooperative social networks.

Ownership and Expertise

Similarly, the ethnographies revealed something about hierarchy and expertise. Above, I allude to some of the ritual obligations individuals and households are required to fulfil. These include maintaining the wealth and purity of a temple god, and maintaining good relations with the chthonic inhabitants of skies, mountains, soil and water. The following statement, taken from an interview with a former project coordinator for a traditional medicine programme, gives an indication of the cycle of consultation between ritual experts, villagers and the supernatural neighbours:

There is a concern that now there is more dip [ritual pollution]. There is less snow, and the glaciers are receding. Previously, for the smallest undertaking, ceremonies were performed: an oracle or onpo [lay ritual specialist] was consulted, an auspicious date was given, and a monk invited to perform the required ceremony. The sadag [landlords of the soil] need to be kept happy (Interview Transcript, 21 December 2010).
Martin Mills’ (2003) ethnography of Buddhist village life in the 1990s demonstrates how daily fortunes and misfortunes were intertwined with the dispositions and activities of the various supernatural entities with whom humans and other animals share their habitats: ‘Indeed, villagers’ lives and goals were formed amidst a perceived world of threats and opportunities from capricious local gods, easily angered water spirits and wandering gods and demons whose influence on health, fertility, the weather, and many other fulcrums of human happiness and misery, demanded constant care and propitiation’ (ibid.: 149).

Mills’ ethnography describes how village organisation consists of levels of ritually structured entities: individual (lay and monastic), household, village and monastery – themselves hierarchically organised around temples to worldly and transcendent protector deities. Prior to any undertaking that involves disturbing the earth, offerings must be made to the beings inhabiting the earth – the landlords (sadag, zhidag and lu) – asking their permission to exploit the land. Households offer patronage in the form of agricultural produce to ritual experts, who in return ceremonially mediate human worlds, temple divinities and supernatural inhabitants in order to remain on good terms with them and maintain good fortune.

Ritual expertise is embodied in the personhood of various experts. At the apex are the incarnate tulku, manifestations of Buddhahood and custodians of ritual inventories specific to the territorial location. Beneath the tulku come the monastic congregation and non-monastic ritual specialists: the onpo (astrologer and exorcist), the amchi (practitioner of the traditional medicine system), and lhapa or lhamo (human vessels trained to host local deities when summoned). These various experts have learned their techniques of expertise through the transmission of scholarly lineages and ritual traditions with specific roots (ibid.: 174). Whilst the careers of monastic incumbents and expertise are confined to guaranteeing the correct ritual conditions that allow productive and reproductive activities to thrive, the lay specialists’ expert identities intersect with their productive ones, and they participate both as equivalent and expert village members.

When I compared my own field data with these accounts, I found that they corroborated them (albeit also revealing a situation that is being tested and altered by contemporary change). Ritual practice still permeates much social life, including in the administrative urban centre of Leh (although to a lesser extent than previously). Health and wealth of the household and its temple remain a significant determinant in the fulfilment of well-being. Household income – increasingly generated from remunerated employment rather than agriculture – continues to be directed towards supporting the households’ ability to offer patronage and sponsor rites.

Further still, worldly deities are arbiters in the fortunes of social life, and their existence cannot be ignored without consequence. Household income continues to be offered to local deities, asking their permission before exploiting land or begging their forgiveness for unintentional offenses committed. Failure to undertake the correct preliminaries results in retribution and the manifestation of unfortunate events. This suggests that the successful or unsuccessful outcomes of development projects aimed at livelihood strategies are determined by their ability to contribute to the ritual wealth of individual households and the village.

Development employees are reluctant to acknowledge engagement in actual religious or ritual activities of protection at village level. The NGO mission statements and PR materials do not discuss Ladakh’s culture and values in terms of ceremonial symbolism or practice, and during interviews the NGO leaders and personnel took pains to reinforce the secular nature of their projects, expressing neutrality with regard to religious engagement. The stated reasons for maintaining secularism or non-sectarianism in development projects are the Indian Union’s constitutional secularism on the one hand, and the avoidance of religious activity pertaining to a single religion on the other (particularly given the recent history of religious discrimination and existence of Buddhist and Muslim communal tensions in the region). By denying the chthonic inhabitants’ collaboration in worldly activities, of which development forms a part, barriers are constructed rather than removed. However, if the expert performance of certain types of ceremonies considered crucial for the successes of worldly activities were to be acknowledged, would it be possible to further acknowledge that other kinds of expertise or permission are required to facilitate development and ensure that projects are successful?

Analysis

I now consider the evidence of ceremonial subjectivity in such a way that it can contribute to anthropological critique of development and well-being. I begin by summarising the details emergent within the ethnographic accounts. If we recall the ICCS proj-
ect’s statement, well-being entails the individual’s subjective interpretation of material assets. Prior to the introduction of planned development, expert occupations and agricultural production were directed (in part) towards mediating human households, temple divinities and the wider cosmology. As Mills has argued, it is this ‘chthonic consciousness’, rather than Buddhism, that determines subjectivity in traditional Tibetan society (2003: xvii–xx).

The fortunes of the village are determined by the accruing of household wealth, used to support a ritual economy, which is mediated by embodied institutions of skill. Yulpa participate as equal partners in the sponsorship of ritual ceremonies, repairing water channels and pooling resources during cultivation. However, certain situations require expert intervention, for example if the fortunes of the household or village are suffering or if the climate proves unfavourable. In the event of such situations, yulpa invite ritual specialists, whose knowledge and expertise are used to remedy the problem. Whilst expert identities and particular types of status intersect with activities based upon equivalent cooperation and participation, in this hierarchical and divine model of expertise skilled intervention is directed towards ensuring good fortune and remaining on good terms with supernatural entities. This is essential if feelings of well-being are to be satisfied.

My research shows how this is being challenged by development normativity that underpins small-scale development projects: that the recipients are expected to take responsibility. Participatory development approaches assume a community of equivalent individuals ready to take responsibility for the success or failure of a project. They assume a non-hierarchical village structure whereby legitimacy (and indeed expectation) to participate in the development project are presumed based on one’s status as belonging to a particular village, rather than recognising the ways that belonging can intersect with one’s status, social position or expertise. When technologies are damaged or have fallen into disrepair – for example, micro hydroelectric systems or agricultural initiatives such as greenhouses – questions of ownership and expertise arise. When recipients act in a way that diverges from the development model (and the assumptions of social order on which it rests), it is not the normative development ideology that is questioned; rather it is the ‘incorrect’ behaviour of the yulpa. The question of whether societies feel protected by the boundaries of expert practice, not wishing for their removal, is not considered. The results presented compel me to argue thus: when measuring indicators of well-being, there is a need to consider how the villagers may implicitly construct NGO identities and their reasons for doing so.

Rather than seeing them as neutral, Ladakhi yulpa view the development ‘experts’ to be just that: the experts. As with the longer-standing types of expertise, their legitimacy to act and to mediate is embodied in their position, knowledge transmitted through education, and external support. In addition, by casting themselves as neutral facilitators, development personnel do not recognise the yulpa’s attempts to classify them as a further type of expertise with the corresponding accountabilities and obligations. Granted, knowledge of development does not arise from any religious teaching lineage; yet I suggest the possibility of a certain habitus regarding the perceptions of successes or misfortunes associated with development practice: not only may expert-led approaches have validity, they may well be desired by target populations, who may be uncomfortable with the responsibility for such technically or politically ‘esoteric’ decisions. This is not to deny the changes in Ladakhis’ wants, needs and desires resulting from changes in economy and governance. I found Ladakhis to be keen consumers of development, desiring the improved comfort and living conditions that economic development and material upliftment bring. What also needs to be recognised, however, is that whilst materially and economically things have changed quickly in Ladakh, development planning needs to acknowledge what participatory and sustainability approaches do not: that in Ladakh ritual practice is still pervasive, and attitudes towards authority, knowledge and technical expertise may well be moving at a slower pace than the material changes currently occurring. This suggests that cosmology, ceremony and expertise need to be acknowledged rather than denied if, as an evaluative category, well-being is to be successful at capturing experiences and indications of how to be well that are shaped by development recipients’ perception of their environment and themselves.

Final Thoughts

What I have aimed to do is to demonstrate the dangers of assuming the personhood of not only the target beneficiary but the neutrality of the development ‘expert’, and the implications this can have for adequately measuring well-being and how it can be satisfied. I am not suggesting that a ceremonial subjectivity is the definitive or even the dominant ob-
stance to the implementation of development projects as they are currently designed; nor am I suggesting that a ceremonial subjectivity should be preserved as a feature of cultural sustainability (particularly where such ‘traditional’ forms of authority can uphold or be used to legitimise acts of abuse). What I am suggesting however is how intended outcomes and successes of Hill Council and NGO-led development projects can be compromised by assumptions of authority and cooperation that recipients or beneficiaries do not recognise. In this particular study, external observers and development personnel see traditional networks of support and village practices of cooperation as evidence of Ladakhi social organisation as the model of sustainable and participatory development determined according to the normative ideology of global development orthodoxy. What the above discussion suggests, however, is that in Ladakh customary support networks are as distinct for their processes of exclusion as they are for their processes of participation. Nor is the villager an individual agent working as a member of a community who takes responsibility for his or her development; rather agency and behaviour are determined within a complex matrix of ritual embodiment that binds individuals to household, village and monastic temples.

It has been beyond the scope of this article to examine the occasions or the ‘sticky materiality of practical encounters’ (Tsing 2005: 1) when development personnel have had to abandon their professional identities and acknowledge directly their chthonic neighbours through the employment of types of expertise in order to ensure project success, although I have dealt with such encounters elsewhere (e.g. Butcher 2015). I have also elsewhere examined the ways that religious ceremony and development practice together have creatively sought solutions to environmental conservation and climate change adaptation (Butcher 2013, 2015, 2017). Rather, what I have attempted to emphasise in this article is how the normativity of sustainable participatory development as a particular universal, with its teleology of modernisation and progress, reifies ‘communities’ of equivalent individuals with equivalent capacities to act. It is this former tenet that has been internalised by the local administration and NGO sector when it comes to development delivery. Yet knowledge, and the validity of persons to act, rests on acquiring expertise.

It has already been noted that qualitative approaches can contribute to an examination of people’s resources and agency by focusing on social activity that is ‘influential and important, but rarely measured’ (Camfield et al. 2009: 7). The challenge now is to consider what new approaches and associated methodologies can offer anthropology’s applied project, particularly where concerned with development and well-being. A possible framework is to take cosmology and ceremonial performance, rather than normative development ideology, as the foundations for project success. This opens up a space where conceptions of personhood and identity, which may or may not align with the normative conceptions of rights and individual autonomy, are the starting point. Understanding the subjectivities and cosmologies that determine action, and the ways that they reconfigure, or are reconfigured by the development project as concrete practice may add a degree of flexibility to the project model, facilitating development that allows the ‘expert’ to have more freedom to work within the sociological realities of recipient populations.

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ANDREA BUTCHER is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Exeter. Her PhD thesis ethnographically examines the encounter between global development ideologies and interventions, and Tibetan Buddhist ethics and ceremonial performances in Ladakh, North-West India. Her current interests include the examination of climate ontologies and assemblages of climate governance that include climate policy, technical interventions and ceremonial performance. E-mail: a.butcher@exeter.ac.uk

Notes

1. I use limited local terms in this article. Where I do, I transcribe them according to Central Ladakhi pronunciation. I italicise nouns but not personal names.
3. My thesis focused upon the encounter between global development ideologies and interventions, and Tibetan Buddhist ethics and practice in Leh District. I did speak with Leh District's Muslims about the themes covered in the article. However, my analysis of their contribution is not fully developed, and thus I am unable to include it.
4. At the risk of an oversimplification, it is worth mentioning that grassroots and participatory development planning received support from both neo-liberal global governance policies and development critiques that challenged the neo-liberal global order. For a more critical examination, see Butcher (2013).
5. Although the recently commissioned 45 megawatt Alchi/Nimu-Basgo hydroelectric plant has the capacity to deliver electricity across much of the region.
6. Muslims are peripheral in Norberg-Hodge's study. For example, at times of transformation (birth, marriage and death), when ritual pollution occurs and the affected household is unable to participate in social and ritual functions, or enter their household temple.
10. Ibid.
12. Autonomy was sought on the grounds of a predominantly Buddhist identity (Van Beek 1996, 1999).
13. For example, at times of transformation (birth, marriage and death), when ritual pollution occurs and the affected household is unable to participate in social and ritual functions, or enter their household temple.
14. Ritual experts are still overwhelmingly male although this is changing for some livelihoods, notably traditional doctors (amchi). Many of the gods that appear through possessions are lhama: female gods with female mediums. The status of the female Buddhist congregation is rising, although at the time of my fieldwork they were not active ritual experts.

References


Butcher, A. (2013), ‘Keeping the Faith: An Investigation into the Ways that Tibetan Buddhist Ethics and Practice Inform and Direct Development Activity in Ladakh, North-West India’ (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen).


