From Good Intentions to Praxis:
Learning from the Successes and Failures of the Critical Development Forum

Transcript of talk presented at Engineering, Social Justice, and Peace (ESJP) 2013 Conference in Troy, NY
August 16, 2013
Dean Chahim[1]

Thank you so much for having me. It's a real honor. I want to start with explaining where I'm coming from: My parents are from Afghanistan, and I was raised in Seattle. I graduated from the University of Washington (UW) a year and a half ago, traveled the world on a fellowship learning with activists and everyday people across the global South, and now work as an environmental engineer in Seattle and spend most of my free time organizing with a grassroots worker-tenant solidarity organization.

…

When I was 19, I found myself leading the construction of a terraced rock retaining wall in rural Bolivia on an Engineers Without Borders (USA) team.

I was practicing engineering on brown people that I would never be allowed to do in the U.S. That wall could have collapsed in construction and killed the Bolivian community members working on it under my untrained eye. So why was I allowed to be supervisor? Why did they call me *"ingeniero"* (engineer)? After all, I had barely completed a single course in physics!

Our walls would eventually fall down. All engineering works have lifespans. How long would our "solutions" last? What would happen when they inevitably failed? What then? What was the endgame?

Our economic system, however, will continue. Bolivia will stay poor. And if not Bolivia, the can will be kicked down the road. Perhaps Afghanistan will be the next mining backwater.

More than anything, why did Bolivia "need" American teenagers and 20-somethings to design and build basic public works? Did my way of life and country have anything to do with Bolivia's poverty?

These were not questions I asked. I only wish I had been encouraged to ask these hard questions of myself, and of my fellow would-be "developers."

But what if well-intentioned students and professionals had a safe space to reflect critically on the effectiveness of their work and travel in the global South? What if they were challenged to connect the dots between our lives and politics at home and the poverty and inequity they observed abroad? What if they were as vocal in challenging corporate power at home as they are about spreading the wonder of bed nets abroad?

In 2011, along with two disillusioned Engineers Without Borders students, I started the Critical Development Forum[2] at the University of Washington to find out if such a safe space could catch on. Almost one hundred students, staff, and faculty showed up on a cold Thursday night in January. I walked away from our first event evening feeling for once, far less alone. I was very pleasantly surprised to know that I wasn't the only one who had felt uncomfortable being placed in a position of false authority over brown men and women. I learned that I wasn't the only one who

had doubted the fruits of our labor. And more than anything, I found that I wasn't the only one wondering if we wouldn't be better off with fewer green college students flying South with good intentions and more activists challenging power in the belly of the beast in the North.

Building on this energy, we began hosting weekly "coffee chats" in which we invited a professor, practitioner, or activist to come and reflect on their own experiences, and lead a discussion and reflection with one to two dozen students who would come, listen, think, and share. Through laughter and tears, we learned about one another's most shameful moments, shining achievements, buried guilt, and deepest dreams. We built a sense of community where there was none, and created a space where it was OK to challenge good intentions and dream bigger.

We built up this way for months, leading to our biggest event – a panel of critical thinkers and practitioners that drew nearly 250 people into a room built for 100.[3] The discussion focused on moving beyond good intentions in "development" – about alternative ways of making change at home and abroad. The turnout far exceeded our wildest expectations and landed us on the front page of our school newspaper. It remains a point of reference for students who say they had never been in a space where such discussion was tolerated, let alone encouraged.

The following year, we continued our weekly coffee chats, partnered with the Global Health department, and began to lobby the International Exchanges office to introduce new, more ethical training and reflection for students studying abroad in the global South that analyzed privilege, positionality, and politics. We were unfortunately largely stonewalled by the slow moving pace of bureaucracy in the institutions who paid lip service to our ideas but seemed unable to implement anything tangible.

This, we now realize, was what we should have focused far more attention on from the beginning. Our downfall was – as with most student organizations – a transient membership and a learning curve that meant that it was only in students' final years that they were able to fully give back and facilitate these critical discussions for others. Had we focused on institutionalizing programs and systems for students going abroad with the institutional – rather than simply moral – support of faculty, we might have killed two birds with one stone: we would have secured the legacy of our work for years to come, and we would have had concrete goals around which to mobilize our supporters.

Volunteering now as a community organizer, I have since learned that – as Saul Alinsky said – "action is oxygen," and members need to see concrete results to their work. We realized too late that we were preaching praxis and yet not living it – internally, we were all reflection and no action. Students loved the discussions and the community we had built, but fewer were attracted to the arduous work of facilitating the organization from behind the scenes. For a few of us, like myself, creating critical thinkers was reward enough. But others craved being part of something a bit more tangible.

One of the most powerful achievements of our group, however, was creating and facilitating a student-led class on critical approaches to "development" within our Geography department.[4] The class, which was taught twice, brought two dozen students at a time together to learn, share, and challenge one another to think bigger and more critically about "development." Critical pedagogy was central to the course design – we critically reflected on our life experiences in the context of each day's material and topics, resulting in a course which was far more personal and impactful than traditional coursework.

---

[3] Video available here: http://students.washington.edu/cdfuw/media/
[4] Syllabus, teaching philosophy, and selected student responses available here: http://cdfseminar.tumblr.com/

Pre and post-class surveys showed that students largely left with a profoundly changed understanding of their *role* in "development."[5] Instead of seeing themselves only as "helpers" engaged in band-aid work, most of them felt a greater sense of responsibility to challenge – often politically – the injustices and inequalities perpetuated in their name as U.S. citizens and consumers.

We noticed that engineers, while underrepresented in our membership, were the ones most affected by our discussions. In the words of one engineering student who took the class,

> *"[After this class,] I now realize that my actions and decisions here at home have a huge impact on countries and people in the global South. I'm not sure my role is to travel and build things, like I thought coming into this class. It may be through educating myself and others and trying to do what I can here at home. And I think that is something that I can integrate into my life quite easily and continue to do my whole life."*

In so many ways, what this student said summed up our goal as an organization – to unsettle the dialogue on campus around "development," and promote a new generation of radical practitioners who leverage the power of their privilege to make change here at home, even if they may do the everyday work of "development" as a stopgap abroad.

Ultimately, the aforementioned tensions led to our slow decline after the graduation of our founding members. We might say the CDF lived from 2011-2013. It was a short lived experiment, but we believe it proved there is an enormous hunger for critical thought and communities where reflection – and praxis – are encouraged.

Our concrete legacy lies now in the hearts and minds of students whose life paths were bent, even if ever so narrowly, by our work and the faculty and staff who have now seen students are ready for a change.

The changes are small at first, but like any good educator knows, a ½ degree change today might become a 90 degree turn tomorrow. The potential in creating these spaces, like ESJP itself – spaces where black sheep like us multiply – is the power of *leveraged privilege*. What would happen to the ranks of social justice movements if we could divert even a fraction of the students lining up outside the doors of the "development" industry in their direction?

…

I believe the same questions and approach is highly relevant to engineers and engineering more broadly, and especially engineering for the developing world. **What would happen if engineers – rather than designing band-aid projects – took their politics into their everyday lives and laid down their pencils when ordered to design unethical products?**

We keep talking in this conference about how to change the mindsets of engineers. We lament the narrow worldviews of most engineers; how resistant engineers are to change.

Like good students of classic engineering problem solving, we take as a "Given" the external realities of capitalism, racism, sexism, and every other –*ism*.

---

[5] Chahim, Dean (2012). Rethinking Our Role in "Development": Self-Evaluation Report of the Critical Development Forum Seminar in Winter 2012. Available online, http://cdfseminar.tumblr.com/post/58948344571/resources-for-teaching-and-learning-from-the-cdf

And like good engineers, we are focusing inward within this box. We "Find" answers that fit this problem statement. We assume that these external social and political systems are, if not immutable, not worth fighting head on. They're too big for us, and we'll never see our impact.

There is certainly a huge amount of value in our approach. Like any good recursive model, we can loop our answers back in and get closer and closer to the discipline we want to see. Students graduate with a social conscience and make gradual shifts in the way the field is practiced decades later.

But our model will never reach a stable solution. We are already hitting the walls of our self-imposed cage of "Givens": Faculty who are apathetic, students who have too much debt to do what they love, and an economy that has no place for idealists.

We desperately want engineers to *care* about social justice. There are many more engineers we have yet to reach – and for whom our curricula will be life-changing.

Yet we must dream bigger. We must challenge the Givens, uncover their reprehensible assumptions, and exile them to the furthest peripheries of our collective imaginations. How does this happen? As any organizer knows – and many of you have mentioned in passing – we must build our *power*. There are many people – and engineers – with power who may never change or "care" on their own volition. But we can *make them* care.

Where does this *power* come from? Part of it is us, here in this room. Our intellects and our networks can do wonders. We have many rebels here with a great deal of power in their institutions. But we ultimately have only internal power to change the way engineering is taught, and make minor shifts in the way it is practiced.

The Givens - the context of our work - must be challenged with the power of organized people. Everyday people, organizing around issues that are directly relevant to their lives.

We can lend these movements our intellectual muscle, our critique, and our privileged connections. In exchange, we gain a deeper understanding of injustice, a broader imagination of an alternative future, and most importantly - we gain the power we so desperately need to collapse the systems that confine us – systems that reduce us to tools in the service of ever-increasing consumption, profit, and war.

It is only when we can make our work relevant to social movements who have real power that we can begin to break down the structural barriers that stop us from applying our talents the way we want.

In the early 1970s, in a series of so-called "green bans," builders unions in New South Wales laid down their tools and refused to rip apart their historic cities and environmental heritage to build useless buildings for the rich. As a result of their power, the buildings simply didn't get built.[6]

That is the power of organizing. We need to work for the day when we have real power. When engineers can lay down their pencils and throw out their mice when needed – in solidarity with workers who know better than to rip apart their homes and our planet for profit.

I know you all know this in some way. It IS hard to challenge the Givens. It seems so far outside our scope. Yet we will never be able to turn engineering on its head without leveraging *both* the power of our privilege AND the power of organized people. Neither is adequate alone. Let's get going. The world can't wait.

---

[6] Burgmann, Verity and M. Burgmann (1999). "'A rare shift in public thinking': Jack Mundey and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation." Labour History (77), pp.44-63.