

Chasing chaos: a primer on the challenges of humanitarian aid work

by Ashlee Betteridge
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Jessica Alexander's *Chasing Chaos: my decade in and out of humanitarian aid* is part memoir, part travelogue, part textbook.

It's a breezy read, despite being set amid some of the most harrowing conflicts and disasters of the noughties. Alexander's personal and sometimes wry style takes you through a decade or so of her career as a humanitarian aid worker, from a fresh faced intern in Rwanda to being a 27-year-old refugee camp manager in Darfur, to evaluator in post-tsunami Sri Lanka and Indonesia, Fulbright researcher in Sierra Leone, UN desk jockey in New York and early responder in Haiti.

For those new to the world of development and aid, the book provides a good primer on some of the challenges, both personal and professional, that those in the field face. It also holds up a mirror to some of the failings of humanitarian aid, but not without emphasising why it is still so necessary.

For those who are not new to the aid world, a lot of what Alexander writes on will seem fairly obvious. But the easy narrative makes it easy enough to find yourself at the end of the book without too much vexation, and you will probably find yourself nodding along to her critiques of SWEDOW, aid amateurs, and agency politics, as well as her descriptions of the challenges of balancing a life at home and a life abroad.

The book is similar to *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures*, but with a lot less sex and a bit more direct engagement with the bigger questions of accountability in aid.

Given that Alexander now teaches university courses on humanitarianism and development, perhaps it is not surprising that this is the kind of book you might assign as a course reading to a class of bright eyed students in their late teens or early twenties. It might jade them enough to make them ask interesting questions, but not enough to make them drop out of your course. And it might make them think a bit more carefully about sending free shoes to Africa or taking up that unpaid internship in Syria.

Disclosure: The Devpolicy Blog was sent a review copy of this book courtesy of the publisher.

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Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now has her own consultancy, Better Things Consulting, and works across several large projects with managing contractors.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/chasing-chaos-a-primer-on-the-challenges-of-humanitarian-aid-work-20131025/>