Professional development?

by Jo Spratt

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Is development work a profession? A profession has a specific body of knowledge and competencies. What are these for development, and why does it matter anyway?

I've often thought of questions like these when reflecting on my nursing work. When I began nurse training in 1992 nursing was slowly assserting itself as a profession. Among other things, this involved identifying specific nursing knowledge and skills. In 2012, after several years out, I returned to nursing via a refresher course, by which time it was obvious nursing had affirmed itself as a profession. What struck me as the strongest articulation of this was being judged 'competent' to practice. I was assessed against four thematic domains, with 20 competencies and 83 suggested indicators. I found the experience empowering and inspiring: what it means to be a nurse was captured and exposed within these competencies. It was easy to see what a complex, highly skilled role it was: a profession.

Development work needs this. Foremost, development work aims to do good and do no harm. Part of achieving these goals involves workers who have the knowledge and skills to navigate the stormy ethical waters of working in other peoples' countries. This is no simple task in a complex world, with lots to learn from past mistakes. Second, to ensure that development entities, such as donor agencies, employ competent development staff, we need to articulate what specific knowledge and skills development work requries. Our failure to do so makes it easy for political actors to enact decisions that overlook the important skills and knowledge development requires, and therefore undermine effective and efficient development interventions and aid fund expenditure.

Is it even possible to articulate development competencies, given the broad swathe of roles and areas development workers engage in? Another comparison with

nursing is useful. Like development workers, nurses are involved in practical care provision, policy, research, education and management, in a variety of settings – schools, hospitals, the community, workplaces, the military – from urban to rural to remote. Through careful discussion and thought nursing has built itself a set of core competencies. Development can too.

What could a set of competencies for a development professional look like? Woolcock (2007 paywalled) suggests that development studies students need to be trained in three core competencies: data collection and analysis (detectives), reframing ideas for diverse groups (translators), and diplomatic skills such as negotiation and conflict mediation. The need for these stems from the idea that development workers are “practical thinkers” and “reflective doers”. This is a good start, but I think there is more to development work than this.

To stimulate further thinking (please share your thoughts), I propose five core competency domains: cross-cultural engagement, interpersonal relationships, development theory and practice, technical capabilities, and role-specific capabilities.

At its heart, international development is a cross-cultural endeavour: it is about working across contexts and countries. (See Rhodes, 2014; Rhodes and Antoine 2013 for more on this.) No matter where they work or where they are from, every individual engaged in development efforts has cross-cultural conversations. This can even occur in the same office, when people from diverse disciplinary backgrounds work together. Different cultures have different values and norms, which shape interactions with others. Without understanding these differences, beneficial relationships are hindered, which undermines effective development. Particular competencies in this area could include being able to assess cultural differences, and applying an awareness of values and norms to communicating with others.

Related to cross-cultural competencies are interpersonal competencies: the second domain. Development’s complexity demands honed interpersonal aptitudes (as I’ve suggested elsewhere), whether you’re participating in gender analysis in PNG villages, or negotiating funding packages at the Uzbekistan Ministry of Finance. Here, core competencies could include the abilities to actively listen, build and maintain productive working relationshps, understand behaviour change (at individual and societal levels), facilitate, negotiate, manage conflict, and transform diverse perspecives into shared understandings and mutual commitment. Part of interpersonal competencies is the recognition that as an individual, you are engaged in the development process and are an active tool of development. This requires a strong ability to understand and manage one’s self.

Theory and practice comprise the third domain. By now international development has a long history of theory and practice. Development's cross-disciplinary nature (Sumner and Tribe 2008) means there is a rich array of theoretical knowledge contributing to, and critiquing, development action. A body of knowledge also exists for intervention design, monitoring and evaluation. And there are also the mechanics of the overall 'international development' system to get a grip on: the variety of actors and institutions that all have a specific role and history. To be able to engage effectively, development professionals need to have at least a rudimentary grasp of this history, as well as ongoing debates. It is too easy to repeat past mistakes, especially in an area where ideas tend to recirculate once every decade or so.

The fourth domain I propose is that of technical capabilities. These are the sector- or thematic-specific competencies for those who work in a particular area, such as the health sector or private sector development. Competencies in this domain are increasingly important as development professionals engage more in policy dialogue. Without knowing the sector or thematic specificities, it is difficult to offer useful advice to others. Perhaps it is possible, as is often done today, to pull in people with technical capabilities to contribute. Yet too often technical capabilities don't come matched with other important competencies, leading to the perpetuation of the idea that all a developing country needs to do is replicate what works elsewhere and all will be well. This tends to fail or achieve only isomorphic mimicry. If they are to work at all, imported interventions need adaptation to the local context, which requires professionals who have competencies in the first three domains above.

Finally, related to technical capabilities (and perhaps able to be amalgamated with them) are role-specific competencies. If you work for a government you need to know how the public sector works. Similarly, there are role-specific knowledge and skills for community development, monitoring and development, policy forumulation, the list goes on.

Cementing development as a profession will require much thought and discussion about what competencies define a 'development professional'. Professionalism raises questions about how to train development professionals, whether to create categories of practitioner (e.g., such as the novice to expert typology), how to support people to learn on the job and possibly even how to deal with those who fail to meet core competencies. None of this is easy, but it is a conversation worth having. Development is a complex process, where too many mistakes are made. We need to celebrate, articulate and defend what development professionalism 'looks' like, at the very least, to do no harm and achieve as much good as possible.

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