



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 relationships, understand behaviour change (at individual and societal levels), facilitate, negotiate, manage conflict, and transform diverse perspectives 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 formulation, 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.

*Jo Spratt is a PhD candidate at the Crawford School of Public Policy.*