

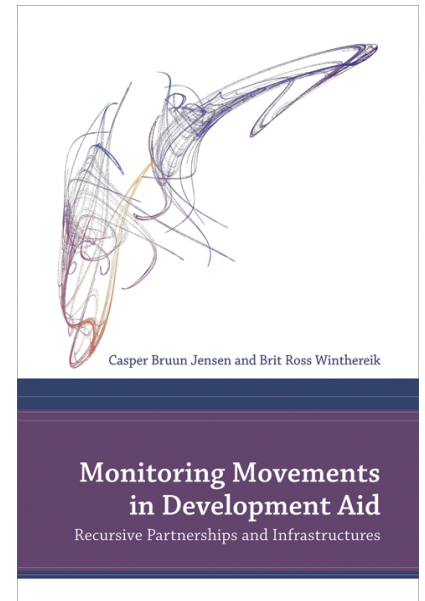
Book Review: Monitoring Movements in Development Aid: Recursive Partnerships and Infrastructures by Casper Bruun Jensen and Brit Ross Winthereik

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/02/12/book-review-monitoring-movements-in-development-aid-recursive-partnerships-and-infrastructures/

In *Monitoring Movements in Development Aid*, **Casper Jensen** and **Brit Winthereik** consider the processes, social practices, and infrastructures that are emerging to monitor development aid, discussing both empirical phenomena and their methodological and analytical challenges. It will be of interest particularly to students in information systems, anthropology and international development, writes **Matt Birkinshaw**.

Monitoring Movements in Development Aid: Recursive Partnerships and Infrastructures. Casper Bruun Jensen and Brit Ross Winthereik. MIT Press. 2013.

Find this book:



kindle edition

amazon

The 2005 [Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness](#) commits signatories to improve the quality of development aid outcomes. This raises a question:

How, we wondered, can agencies located in Denmark, in Japan, or in the United Kingdom know that money spent on projects in Vietnam or in India has been spent well? ... How can they know that their activities and projects in other parts of the world run smoothly and achieve their objectives? (xiv)

[Casper Bruun Jensen](#) and [Brit Ross Winthereik](#)'s book tries to answer this question using an information systems approach to accountability in international aid. Its seven chapters cover themes including information infrastructures and development aid, ethnography, partnerships, auditing and technological politics. Jensen and Winthereik use material from key interviews and 'diagnostic events', as well as 'digital ethnography' of websites, software, and training videos. The empirical core draws material from conference sessions in Oxford, closer examination of an aid accountability project, the relationships between a Danish NGO head office and a local partner organisation in Vietnam, and the Danish National Audit Office. It will be a fascinating read for people with interests in theory and technology working in information systems, international development, and management.

The book is published as part of [the MIT Infrastructures series](#) edited by [Geoffrey Bowker](#), and is certainly a good fit. Consequently the authors draw on some quite heavy theory around the recent 'ontological turn' in anthropology, particularly science and technology studies (STS) (Latour, Mol, Woolgar, Stengers, Haraway) as well as ethnographies of infrastructures, administration and development (Starr, Bowker, Strathern, Power, Mosse, Lewis). The interweaving of their own ethnographic

insights with a light-touch dotting across literature from Deleuze to Power to Strathern allows the reader to get a sense of their interests, although those with a more critical eye may sometimes find it frustrating.

The monitoring movements of the title can be glossed as the tendency towards transparency, auditing, and accountability in development, manifest through the socio-technical systems intended to create appropriate bodies of information and 'publics' able and motivated to use them. Their point is well taken that 'partnerships' as an object of study are *recursive*, similar to networks ([Riles](#)) and development narratives ([Ferguson](#)), as researchers are involved in them; with study participants at the least (Chapter 2). Jensen and Winthereik raise this issue but offer only questions in response, which is a little disappointing. However, their analysis and categorisation of partnerships – as 1) audit loops 2) conflicting demands 3) multi-directional gate-keeping 4) divergent knowledge making – is useful, particularly given the prevalence and flexibility of the word.

Their attention to the mutual evolution of technology and 'new user or subject positions' too is a refreshing change to [overly optimistic](#) views of technological fixes for problems as diverse as [climate change](#), [urbanisation](#) and [crime](#). The 'wired-up users on the ground' and 'not-yet-informatted bureaucrats' envisioned by the software developers point to the importance of the existence or construction / development of future users of new technical systems. This argument about assumptions of imagined user publics is illustrated, economically, with descriptions of sessions by [AidData](#) and [International Aid Transparency Initiative](#) at an Oxford conference (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4, "Development Loop", spends more time on arguments about the directionality of technology (mainly via [Kroker](#) and [Flichy](#)) than one would have expected from the authors adopting an STS perspective. The attempt to bring 'the political' into the discussion perhaps needs further development, and the way that information availability may carry 'post-political' intentions is rather buried in the prose style. There is some sparkle in the discussion of 'Information Highway' as a metaphor 'affiliated with the promotion of democracy, development and international peace at large'. The idea, transposed from Keck and Sikkink's idea that 'talk is cheap' for transnational advocacy networks, that 'information is cheap' in the context of transparency is also a strong point – and intuitive for anyone who has spent time on the [World Bank website](#).



Members of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force show Vietnamese children how to create kaleidoscopes during a medical civic action project at Hung Linh for Pacific Partnership 2012. Credit: [US Pacific Fleet](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Hosted by a Danish conservation NGO for a year, the authors complement their work on virtual infrastructures with discussion of the informal collaborative practices 'that aid organizations currently rely on in their daily operations' (p.93). Jensen and Winthereik use the organising metaphor of 'weedy infrastructure' in contrast to [Mosse](#) (and Hanseth's) framework of *cultivation* as a way of understanding the relationships between formal and informal practices in development and information systems. Their argument is that 'although weeds are troublesome in the context of project accountabilities, they are also unavoidable and generative for knowledge making in the partnership. Indeed, they are regenerative of the partnership itself' (p.96). The most interesting part of the chapter for me, is when the authors, asked to give a workshop discussing monitoring

and evaluation infrastructure for their host NGO, reflect that

'No one seemed to be doing anything clear and distinct that could be called accountability, or to be using any particular technology or standard for achieving it. This posed a simultaneously empirical and conceptual question: Where and when was the infrastructure of accountability, and how could it be described?' (p.101).

The line of thought on 'informal' infrastructures of accountability is pursued in the descriptions of the gaps and tensions in relationships between the Danish and Vietnamese partners. This is some of the most persuasive ethnographic material in the book, captured in several nice observations of development 'in the wild'. The mismatched expectations of a partnership are highlighted in the account of a participatory meeting where, in a 'sullen atmosphere...one doesn't get much help from one's collaborators, who roll their eyes and fail to translate' (p.110). The Danish 'facilitators' are seen to be equally oppressed by the 'tyranny of participation' – 'participation is specifically *their problem*: it is part of their job description to make participation materialise during meetings, though few others seem interested' (p.107). For the Vietnamese partners, 'participation' is the subject of repeated jokes, while for villagers, the excitement of development 'is located in the exotic settings of Danish aid organizations' (p.116). Ultimately, responsibility for these disconnects is located in the Vietnamese partners 'because of the problems [they] have understanding what partnership *really* entails' (p.115).

Unfortunately, the argument apparently directed at [Mosse](#) and [Tsing](#) here seems misplaced. Their reading of Mosse's *Cultivating Development* is somewhat superficial and appears to miss the point. Jensen and Winthereik suggest that cultivation 'is problematic' and wonder that a term which implies hierarchy and control has been used in this field. However, Mosse's use of the term is intended to play on the connotations of pedagogy, artificiality, and cultural superiority. Jensen and Winthereik attempt to re-use cultivation 'not in a positive sense' – however this simply reiterates Mosse's argument about the dangers of an artificially regulated order (drawing on Scott 1991, Foucault 1978, among others).

In this chapter, as with others on the Danish National Audit Office and Accountability data systems, Jensen and Winthereik do provide some good empirical material to highlight the complexities of actually existing development practice. The authors suggest that their method of starting with aid professionals, and following them, offers a different point of view from the 'critical anthropology of development' that finds the field rife with 'Western-centric, paternalistic, or imperialist ideologies'. It should be noted, however, that works such as Goldman's *Imperial Nature* also use a very similar method. Here, again, the tendency towards over theorising and light reading of key reference points is a shame as the argument that infrastructures of partnership and accountability are inherently fragile, symbiotic and 'bound to fail' is an important nuance to overly simplistic representations of development.

Monitoring Movements provides a focused introduction to some intimidating fields of literature, coupled with a tightly focused discussion of the complexities around information infrastructures for accountability in development. It will be of interest particularly to students in information systems, anthropology and international development.

Matt Birkinshaw is PhD candidate in Human Geography & Urban Studies at the London School of Economics. Matt researches governance and infrastructure in Indian cities with a focus on urban water and municipal reforms. [Read more reviews by Matt.](#)