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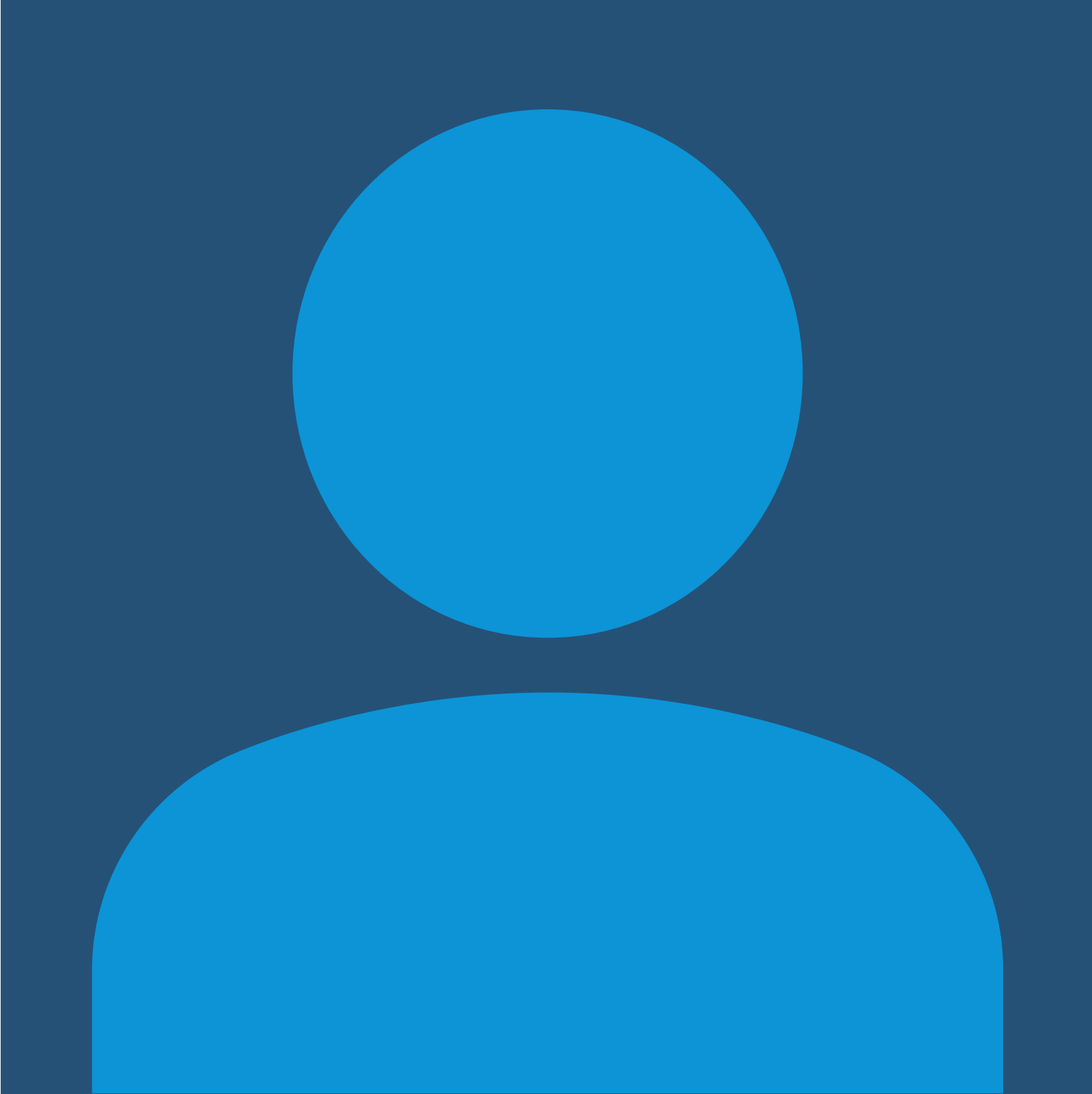
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Tue February 20, 2018



Rajashree Ghosh



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Careers in the overall non-profit industry are coveted especially for those inclined to work on the frontlines of social development. These profiles require working at the community level in direct contact with constituents and establishing workable solutions for change. Others allow venturing across political borders addressing the “social” aspects such as reducing poverty, increasing literacy, improving access to health and education – and that makes it all that much more attractive. In which case international social development emerges as the discipline of choice. But what lies at the bottom of “international social development?

### Defining “social” development

Many universities advertise by referencing current crisis like refugees in Europe, poverty in South Asia to describe how the syllabus will focus on social aspects of development in policy, planning and practice. In effect upon completion of the coursework, students will have gained theoretical knowledge and practical skills to become a social development practitioner. Campus literature especially in the Western hemisphere is peppered with words and phrases such as “human rights,” “post conflict reconciliation,” “sustainability”, “participation” and “empowerment.” Still others make the space for diverse global contexts where opportunities are presented to evaluate different welfare regimes and indigenous responses within a framework of equity and justice. Whichever way one looks at it, the focus is on the “global south” and ways in which the basic programs and strategies can alleviate poverty and exploitation in that region. Knowledge of these key concepts make one “globally aware and relevant.”

### The problematics

The concern is broadly on two levels. Based on experience in international organizations (UN), and with non-profits, and region-wise in global north and south, a unique positionality presents itself. In the north, there is a persistent and authentic effort to define international social development as the “in” subject. It has become an important focus of scholarship and a major global policy arena. With its own epistemological space and pedagogy, theoretical frameworks, methods and approach, it conquers the academic landscape as an independent discipline.

There is consensus that international social development focuses on certain core goals—economic growth, poverty reduction, better governance, quality of life improvements, and stronger human rights—in the poorer and less-developed countries of the world. Yet one cannot but be surprised at the collaborative nature of the discipline. Let’s take the example of urban development which borrows rigorously from Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Literature, policy (national and international). Leaning also on fieldwork, social media, social development emerges with a dynamic and robust character where none of the traditional disciplines on their own adequately meet the requirements. It may be argued that as an inherently interdisciplinary subject, it offers a multi-dimensional perspective. Not surprisingly, many prefer to utilize social development as an approach to achieve a well-rounded understanding of social phenomena.

The second level of concern – and this has substantive implications – is that available literature on social development makes reference to inherent particularities of developed countries when compared to the developing world with respect to issues such as culture, social capital, institutional change, and so forth, which affect the development process. World-wide policies such as Millennium Development Goals and later the Sustainable Development Goals propagate universal understanding that we are all in it together and we are all going to change the world. And that these universal policies will take care of the particular communities and their particular problems. There are documents and tools developed for the less developed to bring them up to par. “Achieving the 2030 Agenda will be a challenge for all countries. It is however particularly salient for the 48 Least Developed Countries, where levels of deprivation are acute, infrastructure is inadequate, economies are vulnerable and capital is in short supply. Yet these are the countries we need to reach first if we are to meet the aspiration to “leave no one behind” Already a schism is drawn between those leading and those lagging “behind” even though the ultimate goal of the global agenda is to create a more prosperous world and put them on a “sustainable development path.

### Local data, global policy

Does this mean that particularizing experiences in the “south” is not part of the policy making process in the “north?” Nothing could be further from the truth. There are local/national needs that relate to human rights issues, gender, trafficking, climate change which are global imperatives. Most policies depend on ground level data that is analyzed at the policy level. Somehow in the north, the comprehensive process of recording and documenting local response to inequities is secondary. It is an annex to the substantive part of the document which develops and propagates the universal policy.

Conversely at the local level, when contextualized, the relevance of the broader policies diminishes – more times than it is commonly led to believe. Some analyses developed in the south pay obeisance to the global declarations and seem to make due reference and draw inspiration. Additionally, documentation happens only with the blessings of an expatriate head who is often from the western world. The senior management of UNDP offices of say India, China Bangladesh and Pakistan are expatriates from the global “north.” There may be other examples from varied agencies. This entails that information on ground level is packaged for international delivery and the narrative of international development couches local phenomena in general terms. Caste conflict might be presented as power by elites, riots may be presented as violation of human rights – all adversely affecting the cause of justice and solidarity everywhere.

**Circling back to international development**

Given that many strategies to combat poverty are developed in the west, it is imminent for members and international social development professionals and activists to participate in policy making and receive credit for local efforts. Planned social change requires investment of finance, effort, time – locally and internationally towards improvement of health, education and the social safety net. Locally the imperative is to look to core areas of opportunity and offer solutions and make significant change to key processes in place. Many developing countries are saturated with foreign aid agencies and participating in a conference (such as the World Economic Form or World Urban Forum) reflects the paradoxes in the discipline – those presenting policy papers and those from national offices often speaking at cross purposes. In a forum Aya Chebbi, a Tunisian activist and youth leader spoke during the opening session and implored the NGO members, “Speak to us, not about us.

While “inclusion” and “diversity” or cognition and action are virtues often celebrated in the west, it has not permeated into the international development policy and renders the discipline open to questioning. As a discipline, diversity in problem solving with regard to local problems needs to be given more space to thrive. Voices from the local areas need to be heard and make up for substantive part of the discipline as a learning process and as a specialized approach. An ongoing policy is only richer for it than without it.

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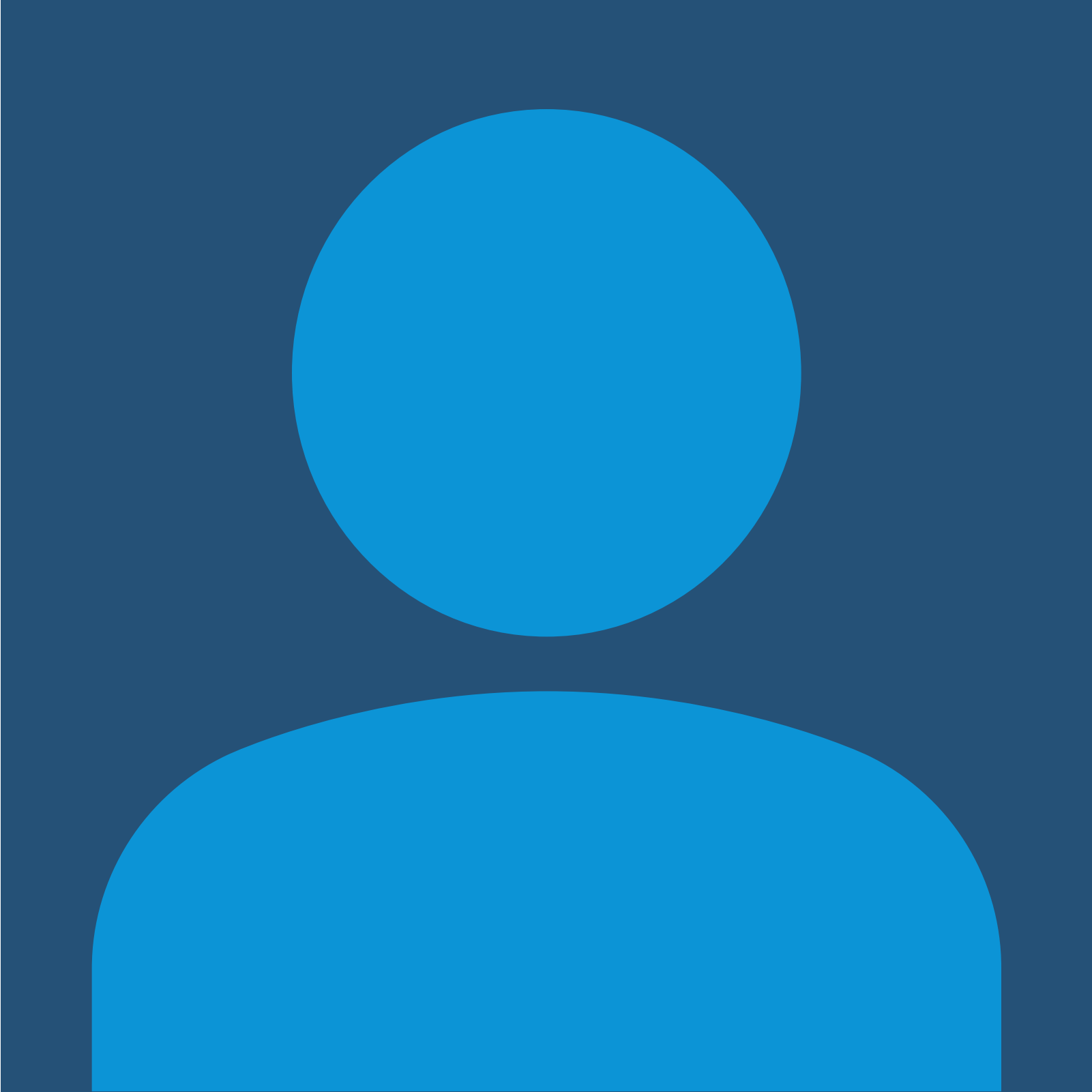


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Apr 9, 2019

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