

6-1-2018

## Beck, Erin. How Development Projects Persist: Everyday Negotiations with Guatemalan NGOs. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.

Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens Ph.D.  
California State University, Northridge, [susan.fitzpatrick-behrens@csun.edu](mailto:susan.fitzpatrick-behrens@csun.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick-Behrens, Susan Ph.D. (2018) "Beck, Erin. How Development Projects Persist: Everyday Negotiations with Guatemalan NGOs. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 9 : No. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol9/iss2/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Beck, Erin. *How Development Projects Persist: Everyday Negotiations with Guatemalan NGOs*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.**

Erin Beck offers an intervention in literature on development, particularly that focused on women in the global South, by comparing the work of two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with distinct goals operating in Guatemala's western highlands. Her contribution is to move research on development beyond evaluations that focus on "outcomes" and that seek to identify the "best" development model, to instead focus on how projects work "on the ground." Specifically, she seeks to illustrate that women who access NGO resources exercise agency by selecting among multiple opportunities, evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of each, and participating on terms that the women themselves influence (though do not define). Beck suggests that the plethora of NGOs operating in Guatemala ensures that beneficiaries approach each organization with a wealth of knowledge derived from their own experience in the marketplace. She undertook her research over a seven-year period during which she participated in NGOs, conducted extensive research on development literature, engaged in participant observation, and accessed records of the two NGOs she studied.

*How Development Projects Persist* is a thoughtful, well-written, insightful book. Among the greatest strengths of the work are Beck's extensive and clearly presented knowledge of the literature on NGOs, her selection of case studies, the clarity and objectivity with which she approaches the comparative analysis, and her stand-alone descriptions based in participant observation of women's interaction with NGOs. After years of studying NGOs in Guatemala (p. 225), Beck selected Namaste, a secular NGO that she characterizes as using a model of "bootstrap development," and Fraternidad de Presbiteriales Mayas (The Fraternity), a religious NGO that seeks to promote "integral" or, as Beck puts it, "holistic" women's development. The two NGOs share in common targeting women and the use of micro-financing as one component of their programs, but neither identifies providing loans as its primary purpose. Namaste and the Fraternity are otherwise almost diametrically opposed in their approach to development.

As its name suggests, Namaste is a foreign organization founded by Robert Graham, a wealthy United States entrepreneur, who believes that all people can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" through creative entrepreneurship. They need only small amounts of assistance to make their small businesses profitable: education, mentorship, and micro-loans, which are made to beneficiaries at market-rate interest – typically "between 18 and 19 percent – some of the lowest [rates] in the country" (p. 103). Namaste identifies itself as a program designed to provide women with these types of assistance so they can succeed as entrepreneurs. The NGO thus requires that women participate in education classes and in one-on-one consulting with Namaste advisors as a condition to receiving micro-loans.

The Fraternity, by contrast, has roots in Guatemala's Catholic and Protestant religious social movements of the 1980s. Its founder Alicia, a K'iche' Maya woman from Guatemala's western highlands, learned women's social promotion as a youth through participation in programs led by foreign nuns. When she married a member of the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala (IENPG) and converted, she, along with other women, sought to create spaces for female participation in her new faith community. One result was the founding of The Fraternity (p.138-9). Like Namaste, The Fraternity provides Maya women (Mam, K'iche', and Kaqchikel) with micro-loans (which are offered at nominal interest rates) but doing so is incidental to the organization's primary goals, which are to empower women and enhance their spirituality in relation to their families and communities.

Beck's baselines for comparison are thus two NGOs that provide micro-loans, but do so as secondary components of what they identify as their primary goals. Both focus on what they identify as impoverished Maya women. Each provides education in the form of workshops to achieve what they identify as the organizations' primary goals. Namaste has a concrete primary goal: to improve women's economic positions by facilitating their successful entrepreneurship. The Fraternity has a more amorphous primary goal: to promote women's self-esteem, participation in faith community, and potential for leadership.

Significantly, Beck explicitly does not seek to compare the two NGOs to argue that one model is "better" or "more effective" than the other. Instead, she examines them without judgement by using their own criteria to measure success and determine the extent to which they achieved their stated goals. Although Beck never makes such a claim, her analysis makes clear that by these measures, neither NGO is an unqualified success or an unmitigated failure. For example, Namaste learned that although Graham's goal was to "target very poor women who did not have access to credit" (p. 69), they found that the poorest women "would simply 'eat the loan'" (*i.e.*, use it for basic subsistence rather than to promote business profit) (p. 73). As a result, they had to raise the minimum income level required of beneficiaries. Beck's study revealed that while The Fraternity sought to help all Maya women, the inherent bias and connections of its leadership meant that the greatest beneficiaries shared the K'iche' ethnicity of the founder (p. 181).

More important than the relative success or failure of the organizations, in Beck's analysis, is the manner in which the Maya women who benefit "negotiate" within the limited spaces afforded to them by the NGOs. Among the most effective components of the book (and that which would be most useful for teaching) are Beck's stand-alone excerpts in which she briefly describes, using her participant observation as the foundation, the "on the ground" experience of Maya women to illustrate how the NGOs work in the reality of daily life. For example, she incorporates excerpts to show how women's knowledge of NGOs enables them to interrogate established terms, interest rates, and requirements (pp. 102-104); the limited effectiveness of training (pp. 114-116; pp. 168-170); and the unmeasured "cost" in free labor of gathering the required number of women to access a loan (pp. 94-96). These accounts humanize development aid.

From this reviewer's perspective, while Beck's book has many strengths, it also has one minor and one significant limitation. To her credit, the author seeks to provide a historical framework for her analysis of contemporary NGOs, yet the work's brevity leads her to telescope and conflate important issues. More significant, is a question about the nature of Beck's objective analysis and intervention in the development literature. Since "success" in terms of the effectiveness of NGOs for alleviating poverty is held in abeyance in Beck's analysis, the reader is left to wonder about the purpose of an aid industry (NGOs), which according to Beck's account has grown from \$1 billion in the mid-1990s to \$23 billion today, constituting 30 percent of overseas development assistance (p. 45). According to Namaste's "objective" criteria, some of its beneficiaries (who are not Guatemala's poorest women, who merely "eat the loan") experienced a rise in income. Beck states that "60 percent of women who receive a loan from Namaste increase their business incomes during their first loan cycle" (p. 121), with the result that *on average* their incomes are \$45 a month higher after their first loan cycle (p. 122). Women in The Fraternity "generally maintain the same standard of living" and "some women develop new skills, increase their self-esteem, or transform their identities" (p. 199). Given these conclusions, it is difficult to find satisfying or sufficient Beck's assertion that "by focusing on

what development is supposed to do, we are missing how it is made and what it actually does” (p.208). In fact, it is difficult not to conclude that “NGO development doesn’t do much” (at least not for its supposed beneficiaries). And, yet, as Beck observes, “Despite discursive shifts, very little ever disappears in the field of development” (p. 220). Clearly, it’s doing something for someone.

This observation is not to discredit the book in any way. It is a strong contribution and will be especially valuable for idealistic students entering the field of development. As Beck notes, it will likely be less useful for those who are “in it.” Yet, Beck’s appeal to understand how NGO aid works should be heeded, not only by looking at negotiations “on the ground,” but also those “in the middle” – the participants leading up the food chain, from the disposable promoters to the highly educated (and well paid) designers, to the global funders. That would, of course, be a different book, yet Beck’s approach provides an excellent model. What would the same approach look like if taken up the food chain?

Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens PhD  
California State University, Northridge  
[Susan.fitzpatrick-behrens@csun.edu](mailto:Susan.fitzpatrick-behrens@csun.edu)