

The role of the anthropologist

- Development anthropology- efforts by anthropologists to improve the well-being of people in the 'developing' countries in areas such as health care, education, and agriculture. - Development anthropology is part of a broad field called international development, a comprehensive term for a broad range of efforts- on the part of indigenous people, specialists of many kinds, and institutions- to improve human welfare, particularly in developing countries. The institutions involved include world bodies like the various agencies and programs of the United Nations, national governments, and to public and private agencies. All of them employ experts of many kinds, including social scientists, physicians, teachers, and agronomists, to undertake international development projects.

A guiding premise of international development today is that both its broader scientific aims and its narrower practical goals are best achieved at the invitation of and with the full co-operation of the communities that are its intended beneficiaries. Another basic premise is that development projects should be sustainable; their intended beneficiaries should be able to continue to achieve the desired results after development assistance ends.

These two premises may seem obvious enough, but they were often lacking in development projects in the past. Both were arrived at after trial and error. - Two guiding premises are that development projects should be:

a) at the invitation of and with the co-operation of the community themselves.

b) Sustainable. - The 'top-down' approach was an early approach to development assistance. It was called the 'top-down' approach because donations and assistance were imposed by outsiders without the full participation of the local people they were intended to benefit- proved ineffective and unsustainable. - Anthropologists' best opportunity to be of service may lie in helping governments, international agencies, and private charitable organisations to better understand the cultures of the people whose needs they wish to address. Development efforts affect different cultures and different social groups in different ways; what works for one culture or group may not be suitable for all. A development project might raise the standard of living of one group of people (e.g. men), but lower it for another group (e.g. women). An anthropologist knowledgeable about the ethnographic details of a particular culture, and aware of it as a holistic entity, is ideally placed to point out to governments and aid organisations how certain changes, while benefiting some, may at the same time make the lives of others even more difficult -A second way in which anthropologists can involve themselves in world problems is through advocacy: using their influence and expertise to defend a cause.

One of anthropology's best-known advocates is David Maybury-Lewis, whose fieldwork among the Shavante of Brazil convinced him that this society needed and wanted help in retaining its cultural identity and defending its interests against government-sanctioned encroachments on their land by big business. In 1972, Maybury-Lewis founded a non-profit organisation called 'Cultural Survival', to encourage tribal peoples' participation in national market economies, to secure their land rights, and to fund projects designed and carried out by the people themselves. Cultural survival also keeps people informed about tribal groups and ethnic minorities by publishing information that results from its research. - The Kayapo of Brazil have adopted contradictory attitudes towards the environment that has harboured them for generations, the mahogany-rich rainforests. In 1988, the Kayapo brought together over 600 tribes to oppose a World-Bank financed project to build a dam that would drastically alter the local environment by flooding almost 500 square miles of rainforest. The environmentalists chose to ignore the earlier Kayapo record of dealings with lumber interests, and hailed them as heroes. Six years later, however, it developed that local Kayapo chiefs had been making illegal deals with loggers that brought them money and an array of Western gadgets, as well as destruction to the rainforest.

 Etic perspective- the anthropological use of the concepts meaningful to the anthropologist to understand a culture. Emic perspective- the anthropological use of the concepts meaningful to the members of a society to understand their culture. The pros and cons of anthropologists become advocates (i.e. speak up for societies who can't defend themselves) for those societies which are considered to be under threat?

Advantages

? If advocates were in a situation where they were defending a foreign society to their own society, they would probably have more 'power' in terms of convincing the opposition to hear their arguments and having an influence on their ideas than if a member of the society was defending it.

? Anthropologists would probably be more able to explain certain aspects of the society better because he himself had to understand the society at first and would be more able to see the difficulties of some ideas, and the ways in which he could explain them so they were more understandable to a foreign audience. Disadvantages

? In some cases, the society would probably feel insulted and that their pride and dignity was threatened if a foreign person defended their culture/society as they believe it is up to them to defend themselves. This aspect becomes even greater when we consider the fact that the anthropologist may explain something which he himself has not fully understood, or has misunderstood, and would therefore be wrongly describing this society to others.

? Anthropologists can also 'expose' societies that don't want to be exposed when defending them.

About the Author