

Modern research methods and empirical analysis within the context of economic development in Africa and Southeast Asia

Dr Caroline Brassard, Adjunct Assistant Professor of economic development at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS), shares with us her experience in Africa as well as the opportunities that novel research methods, such as data analysis, offer us within this field in Southeast Asia.



Dr Caroline Brassard is a French-Canadian Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She has worked in Madagascar for UNICEF and subsequently in Bangladesh for CARE before undertaking a PhD. on economic development. She then moved to Hanoi to study poverty and inequality in Vietnam and obtained a position at NUS in 2002, where she now teaches research methods and empirical analysis for decision making in public policy.

What was it that led you to devote yourself to the field of economic development in developing countries?

Sometimes we do not necessarily plan such things or events and we just slowly get involved in various types of work. As part of my secondary school education, during the time of the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984, we were served a typical meal which was served in Ethiopia that consisted of a mix of water and rice, and I was shocked that it was even considered a meal. It got me immediately interested and I began watching many interviews on television to try to understand socioeconomic inequalities in the world. Eventually I began volunteering when I was living in Toronto to help homeless women and that gave me an insight to a world which I knew very little about because the world that I had been living in was very privileged.

I became increasingly interested in pursuing a career in community development and began working for the Government of Ontario on such projects. Soon I thought that there was much greater need for this type of work abroad and I started searching proactively for an opportunity to work in the field of development but in an underprivileged country. I then studied projects by UNICEF and subsequently obtained a position in Madagascar without having any prior international experience. I had a very challenging experience in terms of cultural adaptation, professional and personal challenges, and health considerations because I was living in a world that was very rural, a place 500 km south-east of the capital where



no foreigner lived. There was no development, paved roads, nor electricity and we were working in very traditional villages which each had a king with his personal council. I was in-charge of community development in 20 villages and my main job then was to work with the local communities, and to decide together with them, on the best way to utilise the UNICEF funds to develop the region through public health, education and infrastructure projects.

If we work towards addressing this problem, we begin to improve the situation on the legal side of things. I believe that this will have a huge impact for future generations.

In your opinion, what are possible opportunities for development in Southeast Asia?

That is a huge question. I would just like to highlight something that I find heart-warming - that is to work towards eliminating social exclusions. By that I mean situations such as children without birth certificates being unable to receive access to education or to basic public services such as healthcare, or even the informal economy where workers are not protected by the law and sometimes taken advantage of economically, and so I think this is a problem that is very present. If we work towards addressing this problem I observe happening, we begin to improve the situation on the legal side of things, by obtaining information about the scale of the problem. I believe that this will have a huge impact in the long run for future generations and that this is one of the areas in which I would like to participate more actively. It is an opportunity for us since we are now able to implement various data collection methods which would

allow us to better understand these social exclusions.



A typical classroom in Myanmar (Source: Unsplash)

We have all seen what has happened three years ago in Myanmar when the authorities refused to address the identity crisis of the Rohingyas, who are not recognised as citizens of Myanmar. There are many national/cultural identities all around the world that have yet to be recognised and I believe that we now need to work together on an international level to address this issue. Unfortunately, the problem is rather huge and there is a lack of political leverage.

This problem is more of a challenge than an opportunity but it is a challenge that we need to address because these are increasingly deep divides within society caused by systematic social exclusions, and constitute a ticking time bomb. Thus, I have been trying to be constructive by talking and writing on these issues. For example, I am currently working on a book on social exclusions and we have identified many examples of such cases in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and South Asia and I am encouraged by research on these issues.



Daily life in Madagascar (Source: Unsplash)

You have worked in Madagascar and for the Ethiopian government in the past. What is your experience with executives from Africa; and more specifically, on France-Africa relations?

I believe that this question is difficult for me to answer and share about the current situation with regards to France-Africa relations because it has been 25 years since my experience there and I doubt that my little experience can be profound enough to accurately respond to the question. However, reflecting on my experience there, the biggest lesson I can learn is to combine different perspectives, different expertise in each project. The tendency to apply top-down approaches may initially bring success when in fact it may result in long-term failure.

One of the experiences I had was working with communities to decide with them on which projects should be funded. One of the situations that upset me the most is now a lesson learnt. I worked with the community on a decision to build a water pump in the village. After many consultations, the engineers, economists (such as myself), and

government employees from the Ministry of Agriculture decided on a place to build the water pump. So, with funding from UNICEF, it was built. In the short term, it was considered a great success. However, the following year, we realized that only a third of the village was using the pump. And so, the failure was that we had not considered that there were factions and different ethnicities in the village. In fact, the pump was built on an area that belonged to one of the village's ethnic groups. Hence, I now realise that we hadn't considered the ethnic, anthropological, and psychological aspects, as well as the attitudes, values and culture - these were not in our decision-making framework. Our decisions were based on economics, topography, and engineering - anything but the social aspects. Therefore, I now strongly insist on considering unexpected potential barriers which are not apparent because often the society and citizens have a perception different from ours on many levels.

You edited a book on natural disasters. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction said that Covid-19 has demonstrated that we (Asia-Pacific) must improve how we manage disasters. How can countries in Asia change our strategies against natural disasters post Covid-19?

There are a lot of lessons to learn. In fact, I am also part of a team that researches Covid-19 in Singapore and I have learned a lot. We implemented a series of online questionnaires during and after the lockdown in Singapore to try to understand the perceptions, the impacts, and the measures in Singapore - to make observations and to understand how people live and receive decisions. To give you an example, there are plenty of available social safety nets and assistance, but people do not use the available aid or do not understand them. With the information we collected, we can better understand why and how to implement access to marginalised people. For example, we have many preconceptions that there is available assistance and our assumptions are that people will come and take the support. They themselves have the barriers that need to be made known. That is one of the things that must be summarised, to take the opportunity to collect information frequently to adjust decisions and ensure that marginalised people can get the necessary support.

We must also ensure that the marginalised people understand the situation as well, because sometimes there are perceptions that one can never imagine. I also work for Bangladesh and with Covid-19 we realised that there are many perceptions with people who are categorised as poor. Amongst these people, there are many perceptions about the cause of Covid-19, which is to punish the unfaithful, and therefore those who are faithful will not be punished. These are the people from whom we collect data from, and I

believe this method of online data collection will revolutionise the way we address natural disasters.

You have worked in Bhutan before. Globally, Bhutan is known for its Gross National Happiness (GNH) index. Last year, Bhutan was the 95th happiest country in the world, according to the 2019 World Happiness Report. How do you respond to critics that posit that the GNH is just a tool to attract tourism and that this index is not very effective for its citizens?

I really like this question because it is a criticism that I often respond to, as I have worked in Bhutan since 2003. In the academic world, we clearly have different perceptions of GNH compared to the general population who see pictures depicting rather breath-taking views with studies like the World Happiness Report.



Panoramic views from Thimphu, Bhutan (Source: Unsplash)

The term GNH originated in the 1970s. The term “happiness” was popular then but nowadays, we talk about “well-being”. Even so, the media continues to regard this term rather cynically, so I am very sceptical about the indicators of happiness, but the principle from which they are derived has been developed - especially in the last 10 years. It has been refined to become a powerful model for all countries regarding certain aspects of well-

being, which should become more important in the long term. For example, the GNH collects data all over Bhutan, which is very sparsely important of nutrition, the cause of certain diseases, and how to deal with certain physical problems, we are better equipped. This is just one example of the power of the indicators. In fact, there are 11 major terms, and some other sub-terms. It is adapted differently in each country, but if we look more closely at the details, we can recognise the power and wisdom of the principle. I don't condemn cynics because I understand that media coverage is very powerful – but if one takes time to understand the principles a little bit more deeply and to look at the indicators, they are quite motivating and inspiring.

Do you think that evidence-based policies are going to become the norm in the future? If so, what are your opinions on such a trend?

To explain the extent to which we always return to issues such as social barriers, perceptions and cultural attitudes in the public sector, I like to use the quote: Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted. I am encouraged by the progress of statistical data and the open-mindedness of professionals in the field who now accept the synergy between the qualitative approach, such as interviews and the quantitative method, traditionally the foundation of any decision-making process, given that we are now able to collect data from samples of sizes much larger than before.

Nowadays thanks to technological developments, we can also conduct studies and analyses of narratives that occur on the internet. We can take any conversation and use software that would immediately transcribe and analyse the discourse and narrative present within. Thus, it is now possible to analyse social media and there are even software packages such as Nvivo which

populated, so data collection is easier. Data is collected about people's knowledge on health, because when we understand more about the allow us to view themes that resurface from discussions and perceptions people have of trends like urban planning and climate change.

I remember an experience that really opened our eyes in Vietnam towards the end of the 1990s. After years of collecting data on the causes of poverty in Vietnam and elsewhere, we had never realised that we had been missing something fundamental because the quantitative data we were collecting had not allowed us to accurately pinpoint these causes. It was not until the World Bank started implementing what we called “Voices of the Poor” at that time, which asks, “In your opinion, what is the reason for which you did not succeed nor manage to rise the socio-economic ladder?” that revealed the following response, “we were unaware of our rights.”

Sometimes this was because people were illiterate; they had no access to anything that had to do with how regulations and the law can protect them. Even if they have had access to governmental support, information was unavailable. This led us to an important realisation that we can get a more textured understanding of the lives of these people when we have qualitative data to better understand economic problems. The point that I am trying to bring out here is the complementary role between quantitative and qualitative data and the use of technology to facilitate our analyses of this information.

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