

Book Review: Research for Development: A Practical Guide, edited by Sophie Laws et al

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Research for Development offers a comprehensive guide to commissioning, managing and undertaking research in development work. **Chandni Singh** finds that this is a very useful book for students of development research and teachers looking for a robust and engaging teaching tool. Detailed case studies and examples from around the world help bring the guide to life.



Research for Development: A Practical Guide. Second Edition. Sophie Laws, Caroline Harper, Nicola Jones, Rachel Marcus (eds.). SAGE Publications. February 2013.

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Research for Development: A Practical Guide delivers what its title promises. Both as a reference manual for seasoned development researchers and practitioners, and as a learning tool for new students of development studies, it serves as a useful guide. The book is demarcated into three sections: Introduction and Planning Your Research, which draws linkages between development theory and how this instructs research design; Collecting Data, which discusses sampling, issues around maintaining data quality, and different research methods; and Analysis and Research Communication, which covers crucial topics like how to write up results and assess them for development implications.



Drawing from their wide experience, the authors showcase examples from various fields including poverty studies, child trafficking, environmental issues, health and sanitation, and gender studies. This ensures that the book appeals to a wide range of development researchers and practitioners. Activities and checklists are included within each chapter which may at first appear simple to the seasonal researcher, but are invaluable to someone starting out in development research.

Chapter 2, “Using Research in Development Work”, discusses the importance of research in facilitating development. The authors briefly touch upon epistemological debates informing research but do not go beyond the familiar dichotomy of ‘scientific’ positivist and ‘social’ constructionist approaches. This was somewhat disappointing, especially in the context of increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary research that requires ‘[epistemological pluralism](#)’. The authors identify two types of research in development. Programme-focussed research aims to inform particular projects and development interventions. An interesting example is [a project that assessed needs of young people and disabled children in Serb Sarajevo](#), offered practical solutions, and went on to inform future projects by Save the Children. In contrast, issue-focussed research seeks to influence policy; an example being Leach and Fairhead’s seminal research in western Africa which challenged forest policies restricting local land-use practices. The research questioned dominant notions around forest management and went on to influence future policy. The chapter closes on a short discussion about the potential ‘uses’ for development research, such as contributing to programme development and influencing policy.

Chapter 12 on Participatory Research tackles the critical questions every development researcher and practitioner needs to consider: ‘participation for *whom?*’, ‘participation by *whom?*’, and ‘participation in *what?*’. Following on from this, the authors enumerate different participatory research methods from ranking and scoring, to visual methods like resource mapping. The discussion also includes use of photographs, videos, and performance techniques like drama as research tools, thus offering alternatives to classic audio response-based tools such as interviews and

focus group discussions. Each research method is supplemented with real-life examples, such as the innovative [‘See it Our Way’ project in Pakistan](#) which uses videos as a research tool, and the [Life Drama project in Papua New Guinea](#) that promotes sexual health using performing arts. This emphasis on supplementing theoretical discussions with examples of previous research is one of the strengths of the book. Also discussed are the practical challenges of doing participatory research, including choices researchers must make regarding their own positionality or the level of their participation vis-à-vis that of the ‘community’.



Children in Papua New Guinea. Credit: [Asian Development Bank](#)

Chapter 16, “Assessing Research for Development Work” focusses on assessing research output in terms of its efficacy in meeting project aims, but it does not move beyond the common ‘strengths, weaknesses, notes for action’ model of impact evaluation. However, two interesting approaches of assessing research impact are discussed: Most Significant Change analysis and Episode Studies. In the former, stakeholders report what they consider to be the most significant factors driving policy change. These narratives are then analysed and sorted by a series of review panels. The final list of factors develops an understanding of the multiple factors affecting policy change, while the process of review encourages awareness within the organisation about the implications of their research. [Episode Studies](#), an assessment tool developed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), is useful to track the impacts of research on a particular policy. The method involves creating a policy timeline and asking key stakeholders to explain how research impacted policy decisions and events. Though short, the chapter has a useful list of further readings for readers interested in research monitoring and evaluation.

The last section on Analysis and Research Communication is a real strength, particularly Chapter 14 “Writing Effectively”, which discusses various research outputs from journal articles to policy briefs and press releases. By focussing on research communication, the authors explicitly engage with the crucial skill of writing, which though assumed as necessary, is not given its due in most research methodology texts.

Overall, the short chapters make for quick reading and can be helpful for those wishing to brush up on certain topics.

The references at the end of each chapter are useful for those needing to go into a specific topic in detail. For example, in Chapter 11, “Collecting Data”, several relevant references are provided for each research tool, organised under headings of ‘general’, ‘focus groups’, ‘observations’, ‘questionnaires’, ‘interviews’, etc. The clear, engaging written style is suited both to readers looking for an overview of certain research approaches, as well as those with more time who can engage with the exercises in each chapter. The chapters are punctuated with real-life examples and case studies that will help a novice development researcher envision what their own research may look like in the field. The glossary is also a valuable reference for students, teachers and practitioners alike. The book devotes 25 pages to a list of useful websites, (helpfully arranged according to subject), which provide pertinent information on different development issues.

While the book begins with the question ‘What is research?’ it fails to mention the equally important question of ‘What is development?’. For any development researcher, the need to engage with the multiple, contextual, and often conflicting notions of ‘development’ is essential, which perhaps is key *before* delving into this book. In summary, this is a very useful book for students of development research and teachers looking for a robust and engaging teaching tool. However, for more experienced researchers, the book may appear slightly simplistic.

Chandni Singh is a PhD researcher and Felix Scholar at the University of Reading, where her research explores farmer vulnerability to water scarcity and climate change in Rajasthan, India. She holds an M.Sc. in Natural Resources Management from The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), New Delhi and a B.Sc. (honours) in Botany from Delhi University. She has worked for two years with indigenous communities in the Himalayas towards watershed development and climate change adaptation. Apart from her research, Chandni is a writer and traveller and has [published her poetry](#) and fiction in several magazines. Chandni blogs at [Village Vignettes](#) and tweets [@chandnisingh233](#). [Read more reviews by Chandni](#).

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