

Influential Researcher: Dr Eleanor Davey



Dr Eleanor Davey works on the history of humanitarianism, especially in the Cold War period. She is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow (2014-17) and Lecturer at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) at the University of Manchester. Before joining HCRI, she was a Research Officer in the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute, London, where she led a multi-year project on the use of history to inform humanitarian practice and policymaking. Her current research is on how national liberation movements and ideas have shaped humanitarian organisations and norms. Eleanor is the author of *Idealism beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954 – 1988* to be published in December 2015.

Why do you want to communicate with public policymakers through your research?

My first interest in engaging with policy came from a sense that, during work for my PhD, I wasn't having the kinds of conversations that I wanted to be having and that the academic research I was doing was not in dialogue with more applied questions or decision-making issues. Now I aim to have my research interact with current concerns – not be driven by them, or tailor its questions to them, but to shed light on the way today's debates are constructed and to use historical research to be part of those debates. Personally, and especially because of the subjects I work on, I find that trying to connect historical studies with contemporary questions throws up greater and more rewarding intellectual challenges.

How have you engaged with public policymakers as a researcher?

My most directly policy-oriented work was undertaken when I was a researcher at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Their Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) had undertaken a project to explore and promote the use of history within the practice and policy of humanitarian aid: pushing for greater historical awareness as well as a vision of the past and the present that would go beyond Western models to include cultures of humanitarianism across the world. The intended audiences for this project included those working for non-governmental organisations, multilateral organisations like the United Nations agencies, and government donor organisations like the UK's Department for International Development. Our activities included research publications and opinion pieces, workshops, public events, and engaging with universities as well.

What are the challenges? What practical skills and strategies can help to address these?

Perhaps the greatest challenge in engaging across different sectors is the language barrier. Each field – academia, public policymakers, civil society, and innumerable others – has its own language, its preferred terminology, its exclusionary jargon. Often this language is functional: it allows those within a field to communicate quickly or to draw on specialised ideas. But within networks it can lead to closed patterns of thinking, and between different networks it can create barriers of incomprehension and exclusivity. Learning to listen to others, learning to express your own point of view in an accessible manner, is essential in tackling this issue.

How has engagement with policymakers enhanced your research and your career?

My experience of working with HPG transformed my own research and created many opportunities for me both in my academic career and in continuing conversations with people working in the

humanitarian sector. It inspired me to consider new questions and has trained me to identify what contributions my own research and that of others can make to historical and contemporary debates. In addition, having to work as a generalist was an excellent experience after the narrower parameters of doctoral research. I also have a much better sense of the difficulties of accessing research – including the paywalls that prevent most people outside of universities from reading journal articles – and why it is so important that we find ways to engage beyond the traditional channels of publication and academic conferences.

You can read examples of Dr Davey's writing at the following links:

A HPG policy brief: <http://www.odi.org/publications/8407-humanitarian-history-past-aid>

ODI project website and further resources: <http://www.odi.org/projects/2547-global-history-modern-humanitarian-action-moving-forward-hpg>

Academic publications:

Humanitarian aid in the archives: introduction (with Kim Scriven)
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/disa.2015.39.issue-s2/issuetoc>

French adventures in solidarity: revolutionary tourists and radical humanitarians
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13507486.2014.933189>

Idealism beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988
<http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/history/twentieth-century-european-history/idealism-beyond-borders-french-revolutionary-left-and-rise-humanitarianism-19541988?format=HB>