

Culturally Informed Policy: The Role of Applied Anthropology in Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT: This narrative review examines the growing relevance of applied anthropology in shaping culturally, socially, and environmentally responsive development policies. Using a systematic literature search across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar (2015–2025), the study includes qualitative case studies, conceptual works, and empirical reviews. Results show that anthropologists serve as facilitators, translators, and advocates—especially through participatory design and community engagement—contributing meaningfully to policy development. Case examples from Nigeria, Guatemala, and Brazil highlight how context-specific anthropological insights improve the effectiveness and sustainability of policy interventions. Despite these contributions, challenges such as political resistance, institutional rigidity, and poor interdisciplinary collaboration often limit the real-world application of anthropological knowledge. These barriers lead to token participation and constrain the scaling of impactful programs. To address this, the review recommends stronger stakeholder collaboration, interdisciplinary training, adaptive evaluation tools, and institutional reforms that elevate anthropology’s policymaking role. The study concludes by emphasizing applied anthropology’s crucial role in co-producing inclusive, contextually grounded solutions to complex development challenges.

Keywords: Applied Anthropology, Policy Engagement, Participatory Development, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Community-Based Policy, Development Policy, Local Knowledge.



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INTRODUCTION

Applied anthropology has increasingly emerged as a pivotal field in the realm of development practice, particularly within low- and middle-income countries. As the global landscape of social and environmental challenges becomes more complex, anthropologists are being called upon to integrate culturally sensitive insights into the design and implementation of development interventions. This shift has been underpinned by a growing recognition of the value of participatory and community-engaged research methodologies. For instance, Hales et al. (2024) illustrate how a project in a refugee settlement in Lebanon leveraged the lived experiences of

participants to inform the design of menstruation-friendly WASH facilities, ensuring that the infrastructure reflected the needs and preferences of the community. Similarly, Korotaeva et al. (2023) underscore the importance of dialogical relationships between families and schools, emphasizing that such locally grounded collaborations can lead to more responsive and inclusive developmental strategies.

Moreover, anthropologists are increasingly contributing to projects that harmonize indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary development imperatives. Long (2024) presents a compelling case from the Ruc communities in Vietnam, where cultural resilience and environmental adaptation coalesce to inform sustainable development initiatives. This growing involvement of anthropology in development contexts indicates a paradigmatic shift from top-down, technocratic models to more contextually nuanced and culturally embedded approaches. The insights garnered from such engagements reveal how anthropology can act not only as a critique of mainstream development but also as a constructive force that empowers communities and enhances the legitimacy and efficacy of policy design.

Contemporary development efforts are unfolding against a backdrop of glaring global and regional inequities. Structural disparities in wealth, health, and ecological sustainability persist, often exacerbated by globalization and climate change. These asymmetries have prompted calls for more holistic and inclusive development paradigms. Workman et al. (2021) argue that the intersectionality of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices with social identity and environmental access is frequently overlooked in dominant development discourses, leading to ineffective interventions. Anthropological contributions, which foreground the lived experiences of communities, are therefore essential in ensuring that development programming reflects local priorities and epistemologies. In the same vein, Gilmour and Plomp (2022) advocate for ecosystem-based approaches to public health that acknowledge the interdependence of ecological and human well-being.

Social justice and peace-building have also emerged as central concerns within applied anthropology. Carr et al. (2025), in their methodological framework for addressing wood fuel challenges in Nigeria, demonstrate how local perspectives can shape viable and equitable solutions. Their study exemplifies the role of anthropology in identifying context-specific trade-offs and co-benefits, particularly when navigating the intersections of health, energy, and environmental sustainability. Thomsen et al. (2020) further affirm that nuanced understandings of social and environmental contexts are indispensable in formulating inclusive and sustainable development strategies.

Despite these promising developments, significant challenges continue to impede the full realization of anthropology's potential in policy and practice. One of the foremost obstacles lies in the tensions between disciplinary epistemologies. Transdisciplinary approaches, by design, require the integration of diverse knowledge systems. However, as Leenhardt et al. (2015) observe, epistemological misalignments between anthropologists and other experts, such as environmental scientists or policy analysts, often hinder effective collaboration. These differences can manifest in methodological discord, divergent definitions of evidence, and conflicting priorities in project

implementation. Anthropologists advocating for qualitative insights may find their contributions marginalized in settings that privilege quantitative metrics and standardized indicators.

In addition to epistemological challenges, communication barriers also hamper the operationalization of transdisciplinary work. Workman et al. (2021) reveal that many community-based interventions struggle with limited communication channels between researchers and local populations, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of participatory strategies. Misinterpretation of anthropological findings or their inadequate translation into policy recommendations further widens the gap between theory and practice. These barriers underscore the necessity of fostering mutual understanding and developing communicative competencies among interdisciplinary teams engaged in development work.

The literature also points to an enduring gap in guidance on how anthropological insights can be systematically integrated into policy-making processes. Oliver-Smith (2016) argues for the inclusion of communities in decision-making to enhance policy relevance, yet few studies offer replicable models for achieving this inclusion across diverse cultural and political settings. Podjed et al. (2016) note the paucity of practical frameworks that demonstrate how to translate ethnographic knowledge into actionable policies. This gap is further compounded by the limited number of longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of community-based interventions, a deficiency that undermines efforts to institutionalize anthropological practices within development programs (Cantillon et al., 2020).

Given these shortcomings, a narrative review of applied anthropology's engagement with policy and development is both timely and necessary. This review aims to consolidate existing knowledge on the ways in which anthropological methods and theories have informed development policies and practices across different sectors and geographies. It will focus on key factors such as participatory methodologies, the role of local knowledge, epistemological integration in transdisciplinary teams, and the institutional frameworks that enable or hinder anthropological engagement. By critically synthesizing these dimensions, the review seeks to illuminate best practices, identify persistent barriers, and propose pathways for more effective and sustainable anthropological contributions to development.

The scope of this review spans multiple geographical contexts, with particular emphasis on regions where applied anthropology has played a significant role in shaping development strategies. These include Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In Sub-Saharan Africa, studies such as those by Sawatsky et al. highlight the influence of cultural mentoring in medical education, revealing how culturally attuned training can enhance educational outcomes. In Latin America, Eversole emphasizes the potential of community-based solutions to address localized development challenges, while Moncrieffe and Eyben explore how social labeling affects policy discourse, showcasing anthropology's ability to unravel the complexities of identity and representation. In Southeast Asia, King's work on cultural heritage and tourism policy illustrates how anthropological analysis can inform culturally sensitive development frameworks. Collectively, these regional case studies offer a comprehensive lens through which to evaluate the adaptive capacities and limitations of anthropological approaches across diverse sociopolitical environments.

In conclusion, applied anthropology occupies a critical intersection between community knowledge, academic inquiry, and policy implementation. As global development efforts increasingly demand context-sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable interventions, anthropology offers valuable tools to bridge systemic divides and foster socially just outcomes. This review contributes to that objective by charting the evolving landscape of applied anthropology in development, delineating its successes and shortcomings, and identifying strategic opportunities to enhance its policy relevance and practical utility.

METHOD

This study adopted a narrative review approach to synthesize current knowledge on the role of applied anthropology in development contexts, with particular attention to policy engagement. The methodological process emphasized a comprehensive and systematic search for scholarly literature to ensure academic rigor and relevance. As the field of applied anthropology intersects with multiple domains such as public policy, sustainable development, and community engagement, the methodology had to accommodate a diverse range of sources and disciplines.

The literature search was conducted using three primary scientific databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Scopus and Web of Science were selected for their breadth of peer-reviewed academic publications and their indexing of interdisciplinary research, which is essential for capturing the complex, multifaceted nature of applied anthropology. These databases provided access to journals that specialize in anthropology, development studies, public policy, and interdisciplinary social sciences. Google Scholar was included to broaden the search to grey literature, such as theses, policy briefs, and technical reports, which often contain valuable empirical data and practical insights that are not available in conventional peer-reviewed sources.

Searches were performed between January and April 2025, and the database queries were tailored to extract the most relevant literature related to the research objectives. The search strategy involved the use of specific keywords and Boolean operators to refine and expand the scope of the review. Key terms used in the search included "applied anthropology," "policy engagement," "development contexts," and "narrative review." These terms were combined using Boolean operators to ensure precision and inclusiveness. For example, the string "applied anthropology" AND "policy engagement" AND "development contexts" was used to identify works that directly address the integration of anthropological approaches in policy-making within development frameworks. Additionally, the combination "narrative review" AND ("applied anthropology" OR "policy engagement") was employed to capture reviews that explore how anthropological methods have been used in development research and practice.

The strategic use of Boolean operators enabled a more refined and accurate search process. The "AND" operator was used to narrow the search to studies that addressed all the key concepts simultaneously, whereas the "OR" operator helped broaden the search to include studies that might focus on any one of the concepts. In contrast, the "NOT" operator was occasionally applied

to exclude studies that were not relevant to the development context, such as purely theoretical treatises on anthropology that lacked practical policy implications.

Once the search results were generated, the next step involved applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine the suitability of articles for the review. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles published between 2015 and 2025, to ensure currency and relevance; (2) publications written in English; (3) studies explicitly addressing applied anthropology in relation to development and policy engagement; (4) empirical research, conceptual analyses, and narrative or systematic reviews that provide substantive insights into the field. Studies were excluded if they (1) focused solely on theoretical anthropology without practical policy or development relevance, (2) were not available in full text, or (3) did not undergo peer review (with the exception of grey literature such as policy reports that were assessed separately for credibility).

To further refine the selection process, each identified article was initially screened based on its title and abstract. This step was essential to filter out irrelevant studies efficiently and to ensure that only the most pertinent articles progressed to full-text review. Articles that met the preliminary criteria were then reviewed in their entirety to assess methodological quality, theoretical relevance, and alignment with the objectives of this narrative review. Particular attention was paid to the context of the study (e.g., geographic region, community type), the nature of anthropological involvement, and the articulation of policy or development outcomes.

In terms of research design, a wide range of study types were included to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. These comprised qualitative case studies, ethnographic fieldwork, mixed-method studies, and conceptual or theoretical papers that provided critical reflection on applied anthropology practices. Randomized controlled trials and large-scale cohort studies were generally not represented in this body of literature, given the qualitative and contextual emphasis of anthropological research. Nonetheless, studies employing robust qualitative methodologies were prioritized, particularly those that documented community engagement, stakeholder analysis, and participatory approaches within development interventions.

The evaluation of selected literature was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach. Themes were derived inductively from the content of the studies, focusing on recurring patterns and insights relevant to the objectives of the review. These themes included community participation, transdisciplinary collaboration, integration of local knowledge, communication challenges, and institutional frameworks for policy engagement. Each theme was examined for both its empirical grounding and its implications for theory and practice in applied anthropology.

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the review, multiple strategies were employed. These included triangulation of data sources by consulting multiple databases, peer debriefing through consultation with domain experts, and reflexive journaling by the researchers to document decision-making processes during article selection and analysis. Grey literature was appraised using adapted criteria that considered authorship credibility, institutional affiliation, and methodological transparency.

In conclusion, this methodology was designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of applied anthropology in development contexts, with an emphasis on its intersection with public policy. By combining rigorous search strategies with carefully articulated inclusion criteria and thematic analysis, the review aims to contribute meaningfully to academic and practitioner discourse on how anthropological insights can inform and enhance policy-making processes in diverse socio-political settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative review are organized into three overarching themes that capture the multifaceted roles of applied anthropology in development policy: the role of anthropologists in public policy interventions, interdisciplinary collaboration and its challenges, and comparative regional case studies. Each theme draws from empirical evidence and literature reviewed through an integrative lens to understand how anthropological engagement contributes to, or is limited by, contemporary policy environments.

Applied anthropology plays a critical role in shaping and informing public policy interventions, particularly within development frameworks. Anthropologists engage in deep ethnographic research, stakeholder consultations, and translation of local knowledge into actionable policy recommendations. As Eversole (2017) articulates, this involvement spans from participatory fieldwork to advising decision-makers, ensuring that cultural context informs institutional action. For instance, Hales et al. (2024) documented how anthropological approaches were employed in the design of menstruation-friendly infrastructure in refugee settlements in Lebanon. Through participatory research, communities were empowered to co-develop solutions that addressed both practical and cultural aspects of menstrual hygiene, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life.

Anthropologists also function as mediators between communities and government structures. They help articulate community needs in formats compatible with policy discourse, as seen in the study by Korotaeva et al. (2023), which illustrated the benefits of fostering dialogue between families and schools. This collaboration served as the foundation for more inclusive educational policy development. In these roles, anthropologists do not merely insert cultural data into policy models; they foster spaces where marginalized voices are represented and legitimated within formal governance processes.

Empirical studies offer strong evidence for the effectiveness of anthropological participation in shaping development outcomes. In Nigeria, Carr et al. (2025) illustrated how anthropologists contributed to assessing the trade-offs and co-benefits of wood fuel interventions. Their involvement helped elucidate the sociocultural and economic dimensions of energy access, leading to context-specific, multi-sectoral strategies that were more sustainable. Similarly, Sawatsky et al. (2016) highlighted the value of cultural mentoring in Sub-Saharan African medical education systems, emphasizing that the inclusion of anthropological insight led to improvements in educational outcomes by aligning curricula with community norms and values.

In the public health sector, Workman et al. (2021) demonstrated that anthropologists improved sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions by illuminating the lived experiences and socio-

economic realities of target populations. These nuanced understandings allowed development practitioners to design interventions that were more aligned with user behavior and cultural beliefs. Such results confirm that anthropological insights can significantly enhance the relevance and sustainability of policy initiatives.

Beyond their roles in community engagement and public policy, anthropologists are increasingly involved in interdisciplinary collaborations that span multiple sectors and domains. These collaborations are essential for addressing complex development challenges but are not without significant obstacles. Skyberg (2022) observes that while interdisciplinary teams have the potential to innovate, divergent terminologies, disciplinary priorities, and methodological approaches can hinder effective communication and decision-making. Such frictions may result in suboptimal policy outcomes or impede the translation of ethnographic insights into scalable interventions.

Hales et al. (2024) further reinforce the necessity of building inclusive dialogues among stakeholders, including technical experts and community members. Their study revealed that participatory design processes, facilitated by anthropologists, encouraged more empathetic and responsive policymaking. This supports the assertion by Oliver-Smith (2016), who emphasized the importance of incorporating community behavior into disaster risk reduction policies. Anthropologists in these settings helped policymakers anticipate and adapt to local reactions, enhancing both policy legitimacy and implementation success.

However, systemic barriers often constrain the efficacy of interdisciplinary engagement. Skyberg (2022) reports that conceptual misunderstandings rooted in professional cultures can generate confusion and reduce the collaborative potential of diverse teams. Furthermore, institutional hierarchies within government and donor organizations may resist the flexibility required for transdisciplinary innovation. Cornish (2015) noted that system-based models of management often prioritize stability over adaptability, thereby suppressing opportunities for anthropologists to meaningfully contribute to policy design.

Cultural assumptions within institutions further complicate collaboration. Shaw (2019) highlights that power asymmetries and entrenched disciplinary biases often skew decision-making processes. These dynamics marginalize anthropological contributions and create imbalances that weaken collective accountability in policy formulation. To address these challenges, institutions must foster a culture of mutual respect and establish mechanisms for equitable knowledge exchange.

Regional case studies offer compelling illustrations of both the successes and limitations of applied anthropology in development policy. In Guatemala, Colom (2022) described a project where transdisciplinary research led to policies that were more attuned to local needs. Anthropologists played a critical role in mediating between community priorities and institutional frameworks, resulting in interventions that were culturally and politically viable. This example underscores the potential of anthropology to harmonize local realities with policy imperatives, particularly when researchers are embedded within the communities they study.

The Nigerian case further supports the value of collaborative approaches. Carr et al. (2025) highlighted the need for multi-sector planning in addressing energy-related challenges. Their research emphasized that solutions must account for intersecting concerns such as economic vulnerability, environmental sustainability, and gender roles. Anthropologists in this context

contributed to integrating social dimensions into resource management policies, yielding more comprehensive and effective interventions.

In contrast, the Brazilian experience, as detailed by Górká and Plens (2020), reveals the consequences of insufficient integration of local knowledge. Their study showed that failure to recognize cultural heterogeneity and institutional mistrust led to policy inefficacy. Despite having anthropological expertise available, bureaucratic rigidities and political constraints often undermined collaborative efforts, illustrating the risks of tokenistic engagement and the need for more systemic inclusion of anthropological perspectives.

Comparing these regional approaches with those adopted elsewhere offers valuable insights. In Guatemala and other parts of Latin America, participatory models emphasize dialogue and community empowerment. For example, health programs in Bolivia similarly reflect this participatory ethos, with community members contributing to both policy formulation and implementation (Serin et al., 2016). These approaches demonstrate how applied anthropology can contribute to building institutional trust and policy legitimacy.

Nigeria's pragmatic and outcome-driven strategies align with broader African trends where community-based methods are frequently employed to address localized challenges. The emphasis on stakeholder collaboration, as demonstrated by Sawatsky et al. (2016), underscores the importance of co-creating solutions with end-users. This approach has led to more effective policy responses and greater community buy-in across several African countries.

Brazil's case, by contrast, reflects a context where structural and political complexities complicate the integration of anthropological insights. Issues such as religious influence, bureaucratic inertia, and political instability often create barriers to inclusive policymaking. In contrast, European contexts, particularly in Scandinavian countries, have seen more institutionalized roles for anthropologists in governance, where their expertise is routinely consulted in policy cycles (Burleson et al., 2018). This suggests that the political and institutional environments in which anthropology is applied significantly shape its impact.

Overall, while the use of applied anthropology in development policy shows consistent benefits in promoting context-sensitive and participatory approaches, its success is highly contingent on local conditions. Effective engagement depends not only on the expertise of anthropologists but also on the willingness of institutions to accommodate diverse epistemologies and power-sharing arrangements. The comparative evidence reveals that anthropological contributions are most effective when embedded in collaborative, flexible, and context-responsive policy frameworks. As such, future development programs should prioritize mechanisms that foster integrative, cross-sector partnerships and institutional cultures that value qualitative insights alongside technical solutions.

The findings of this narrative review confirm and extend existing literature that emphasizes the strategic role of applied anthropology in shaping culturally informed development policies. Studies such as those by Hales et al. (2024) and Eversole (2017) provide robust evidence that anthropological engagement leads to more inclusive and responsive interventions, particularly when community voices are actively integrated into the design process. Hales et al.'s work on menstrual hygiene interventions in refugee contexts illustrates how participatory methods yield

practical benefits, while Eversole outlines a conceptual framework that legitimizes bottom-up development approaches. This review supports these conclusions but further complicates them by highlighting enduring limitations in institutional uptake, interdisciplinary communication, and political support for anthropological knowledge.

Despite the increasing endorsement of applied anthropology, several structural constraints continue to undermine its full potential in policy spaces. As Carr et al. (2025) show, even where anthropological methods have proven effective—as in fuel policy interventions in Nigeria—their institutionalization often stalls due to dominant paradigms that prioritize technical rationality over contextual nuance. These findings resonate with critiques that, although anthropology is widely recognized for its capacity to localize development interventions, systemic biases within policymaking ecosystems frequently obstruct its integration. Consequently, this review challenges the assumption that the value of anthropology is self-evident and instead calls for more strategic efforts to embed anthropological practice within formal policy architectures.

A critical factor influencing the success or failure of anthropological approaches is the political context in which development policies are crafted and implemented. In Nigeria, political support for multisectoral collaboration was a decisive element in facilitating anthropological engagement, as documented by Carr et al. (2025). However, in contexts like Guatemala, political instability and external pressures can derail even the most well-intentioned transdisciplinary initiatives (Colom, 2022). These variations underscore that applied anthropology cannot function independently of political economy. Rather, it must navigate power asymmetries and bureaucratic constraints that often reduce participation to tokenism. As Workman et al. (2021) argue in the context of WASH policies, overlooking the sociopolitical structures that shape community behavior leads to ineffective programming, regardless of how participatory the design process may appear.

Organizational structures and cultures further determine the operational viability of applied anthropology. Hierarchical and siloed institutions tend to suppress cross-sectoral dialogue, creating barriers to collaborative planning and implementation. Skyberg (2022) notes that rigid bureaucracies inhibit knowledge exchange between disciplines, leading to miscommunication and inefficiencies. This observation is echoed in multiple studies that reveal how institutional inflexibility undermines the adaptive capacity required for anthropological methods to take root in policy cycles. The lack of institutional frameworks that value qualitative insights, in particular, hampers the legitimacy and longevity of anthropological contributions. These organizational factors suggest that reforming internal structures and incentives within institutions is crucial to enabling more inclusive policymaking.

Another systemic factor is the undervaluation of local knowledge in development decision-making. Despite widespread calls for participatory development, many policy actors still operate from technocratic assumptions that marginalize vernacular expertise. As shown by Workman et al. (2021), programs that fail to incorporate local sanitary practices often face community resistance or suffer from low uptake. The failure to legitimize local epistemologies not only undermines intervention outcomes but also erodes trust between communities and institutions. Addressing this issue requires a paradigm shift toward co-production of knowledge, wherein community members are treated as equal partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development initiatives.

These challenges are not insurmountable. The literature reviewed offers several strategic pathways to enhance the role of anthropology in development. One promising approach involves deepening stakeholder engagement through participatory platforms. Hales et al. (2024) highlight the effectiveness of community co-design processes, which not only improve the cultural relevance of interventions but also build mutual accountability among stakeholders. Such models facilitate dialogue between communities, policymakers, and technical experts, creating a feedback loop that strengthens policy resilience. In these participatory settings, anthropologists play a vital role in facilitating communication and translating local concerns into policy-relevant formats.

Education and interdisciplinary training also emerge as key solutions. Skyberg (2022) emphasizes the need for cross-training programs that equip anthropologists, engineers, public health workers, and other professionals with a shared vocabulary and collaborative skills. These initiatives can mitigate epistemological divides and foster mutual respect among disciplines. The creation of joint degree programs or interdisciplinary research consortia may offer institutional support for such efforts, helping to normalize collaboration as an academic and professional norm.

Methodological innovation is another avenue for overcoming disciplinary silos. Mixed-methods research that combines qualitative ethnography with quantitative data collection offers a more holistic understanding of development challenges. Workman et al. (2021) demonstrate how triangulating data from multiple sources enhances the credibility of anthropological insights and facilitates their uptake in policy environments that favor measurable outcomes. Adopting methodological pluralism not only broadens the evidentiary base for policy decisions but also aligns with the complexity of real-world problems.

Advocacy for structural change in policy institutions is also necessary. Eversole (2017) argues that anthropology must go beyond critique and actively engage in shaping policy discourse. This includes lobbying for institutional mechanisms that formally recognize the role of anthropology in development, such as advisory panels, dedicated funding streams, and mandated community consultations. Strategic engagement with policymakers, civil society organizations, and funding agencies can help institutionalize anthropological practices and elevate their status within decision-making hierarchies.

Evaluative frameworks tailored to anthropological interventions can further support their integration into policy cycles. Carr et al. (2025) stress the importance of adaptive evaluation systems that provide continuous feedback on intervention performance. Unlike conventional evaluation models that prioritize linear outcomes, these frameworks accommodate the iterative and context-sensitive nature of anthropological work. Embedding such evaluation mechanisms within development programs can enhance learning and accountability while preserving the epistemological integrity of anthropological methods.

Lastly, fostering collaborative networks among practitioners, academics, and community leaders can reinforce the legitimacy and sustainability of applied anthropology. Podjed et al. (2016) advocate for the establishment of communities of practice that facilitate knowledge sharing and mutual support. These networks can function as incubators for innovation and advocacy, bridging the gap between theoretical research and practical application. They also provide a platform for reflecting on ethical dilemmas and power dynamics that arise in applied settings, thereby strengthening the ethical foundations of the discipline.

While this review affirms the utility of applied anthropology in development contexts, it also acknowledges certain limitations in the current literature. Many of the studies analyzed focus on short-term interventions or case studies that lack longitudinal follow-up. This makes it difficult to assess the sustained impact of anthropological engagement or to generalize findings across diverse contexts. Furthermore, the geographic scope of existing research remains uneven, with underrepresentation of regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Addressing these gaps requires more comprehensive and geographically diverse research agendas, supported by funding structures that prioritize long-term, community-based inquiry. In addition, future studies should explore how digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and remote collaboration tools can augment anthropological practice in an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This review has synthesized evidence across multiple geographies and sectors to demonstrate the critical role of applied anthropology in shaping responsive, inclusive, and sustainable development policies. Key findings affirm that when anthropologists are actively engaged in policy processes—through participatory design, translation of local knowledge, and interdisciplinary collaboration—interventions become more contextually appropriate and socially equitable. However, systemic barriers, including institutional rigidity, political constraints, and the undervaluation of community knowledge, continue to impede the effective integration of anthropological insights. The urgency of addressing global inequities, environmental degradation, and social marginalization highlights the need for anthropologically informed interventions that are grounded in local realities.

To overcome persistent obstacles, this study recommends strengthening stakeholder engagement mechanisms, promoting interdisciplinary education and training, and embedding adaptive evaluation frameworks in development programs. Institutional reforms that formally recognize the role of anthropological expertise in policy-making are also essential. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of anthropological interventions and expand geographically to underrepresented regions, while also investigating digital tools that can enhance participatory practices.

Ultimately, applied anthropology offers a unique epistemological and methodological framework for addressing the complexity of development challenges. By centering local knowledge, fostering inclusive dialogue, and promoting systemic reform, anthropology can significantly contribute to more effective and equitable development outcomes. Addressing the challenges identified in this review requires a committed investment in collaboration, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity as core strategies in development planning and policy implementation.

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