

Introducing

# Alesha Porisky

Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Political Science

**Alesha Porisky is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University, and a GLD fellow of 2022. Her research focuses on the intersections between social policies, cash transfers, state-society relations, citizenship, gender, and fieldwork ethics. She has also worked as a filmmaker for the UNDP. In this piece, Alesha shares her thoughts on what research can learn from the world of filmmaking and the persons that sparked her interest to study cash transfers.**

**You will be continuing your localization of cash transfer policies research in Kenya and Tanzania during your GLD fellowship. Why did you choose to study cash transfers in these two countries?**

My research on cash transfers began at the same time that there was a rather rapid explosion of these kinds of policies around the world - from Brazil to Mexico to Indonesia to India to Ethiopia and many other states in sub-Saharan Africa. This seemed a fascinating type of policy diffusion to explore. More narrowly, it was clear that while the global spread of cash transfers was driven in part by major development partners like the World Bank, these policies were shaped and localized in interesting and potentially transformative ways. This seemed especially the case in East Africa. However, I have been interested not just in policy adoption but also the potential impacts of cash transfers on citizens' access to the state and their understandings of citizenship. This interest in citizenship drove my choice to center attention on Luo communities in Kenya and Tanzania



– communities separated by an arbitrarily drawn colonial border – to understand how perceptions and practices of citizenship are shaped by state policy. More generally, these are important policies and potentially transformative ones. Cash transfers have the potential to reach marginalized and underserved communities and exploring their contours and the myriad effects they have on people's lives and political participation seemed important to me. Selfishly, too, both countries are amazing places to spend time living and working in and I have been fortunate to have enjoyed so much time in such wonderfully welcoming communities.

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**I saw that you worked as a filmmaker at the UNDP in 2011. In your opinion, what can researchers learn from filmmaking?**

At the core of both are the human experience. Much in the same way that the short documentary films I produced for the UNDP were a form of storytelling, my own research tries to uphold the voices and experiences of the communities with whom I conduct research. I think it is important for researchers in the social sciences to remember, regardless of epistemology, that people are at the center of their research. Thus, both in film and in research, ethical engagement with communities is of utmost importance. In my opinion this includes ensuring communities have access to and opportunities to engage with scholarly and creative outputs, through workshops, film screenings, and other means.

**Who or what has influenced you the most to an academic career so far?**

In the last year of my undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia, I took a course with Dr. Max Cameron on Politics in Latin America. This is where I first learned about cash transfer policies, and that sparked my interest. But more generally, his approach to teaching and research inspired me to undertake an academic career. He took the time to work closely with me to develop my research on cash transfers, which ultimately influenced my PhD dissertation and subsequent work. I have also benefited from the support of a phenomenal group of women academics who have provided invaluable mentorship throughout my early career. They have inspired me with their own research and provided a model of mentorship that is equal parts rigorous, supportive, and compassionate. It is this approach, to both teaching and research, that I hope to emulate throughout my own career.



*From Alesha's research on cash transfers. Credit: Alesha Porisky*

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