Introducing Aidnography

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Introduction

This volume brings together a set of critical analyses of development aid and aid relationships. An 'aid relationship' in this context refers to the matrices of rhetoric, ritual, power and material transactions euphemistically termed 'development cooperation' between rich and poor countries. Three threads connect these quite different analyses. One, all of the studies probe the vertical relations between 'donors' and 'recipients', with antenna finely tuned to the frequencies of power, authority and discipline. Two, all of the authors are sensitive to and concerned with the construction of meaning – the hermeneutic mechanisms through which actors justify their claims and actions, or simply attempt to make sense of 'development.' Three, there is a common attempt to come to terms with the phenomenon of aid in a pragmatically disinterested way. To borrow David Mosse's (2003) distinction, these studies grapple with the issue of *how* development works – what social relations and subjectivities do the interventions of development aid conjure into existence? – in order to problematize taken-for-granted accounts of *whether* development works – i.e., are projects 'successful'?

When these strategic concerns link up with a passion for first-hand empirical data – as occurs in many of the essays below – one can speak of a fledgling

research programme committed to the ethnographic study of aid. The aim of this volume is to outline this research program through concrete illustrations and reflexive accounts. Methodology, in the dual sense of intellectual framework, and of research strategy and tools, has been a special concern of most authors. Taken together, these analyses represent a tentative map of the perspectives and themes that characterize the ethnographic study of contemporary aid relations.

To contextualize these analyses, this brief introduction begins with a sketch of critical factors affecting the structuration of aid relationships at the beginning of the 21st century. This is followed by an overview of the eight substantive contributions. The introduction ends by posing a key methodological question: can ethnography grasp a phenomenon that is constituted at multiple scales?

The dynamics of aid relationships

How one defines the object of aidnography depends on where one is, how one positions oneself in the sprawling (multi-levelled, multi-sited) 'field' of aid. From where I sit at the moment, in the Finnish capital of Helsinki, aid is an elusive, almost invisible entity. Development cooperation commands a non-negligible slice of Finland's national budget, and yet the civic and political passions that aid elicits are very muted. Aid's impact on the daily life of the Finnish population is miniscule, whether as an employer or as a market for goods and services. While a tiny, highly specialized guild of development professionals (in the Foreign Ministry, in consultancy firms, in private/civic aid organizations and in research bodies) is intensely involved in spending and assessing the deployment of aid monies, it would not be hard for a layperson to spend a considerable time in Finland without confronting 'development aid' in any form.

In the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam, however, it is a very different story. Aid and donors agencies have a ubiquitous presence in presidential proclamations and ministerial speeches. The media give great attention to foreign aid. Dar's city centre is spotted with donor agency offices, and the

massive, shiny four-wheel drive vehicles emblematic of the aid industry exacerbate the congestion of narrow downtown streets. Foreign grants and loans dominate the Tanzanian government's public expenditure and aid is, for a significant segment of the elite (in government, in consultancy forms, and in NGOs), an important employer and market. It is difficult to spend even a short time in the capital of the world's most aid-dependent country without being exposed to some aspect of the aid industry.

In much of the rest of Tanzania, outside the major cities and towns, aid is not so visible, much less so in fact than in the recent past. An important reason for this decline in visibility is recent changes in the 'modalities' and 'architecture' of aid. Until the late 1990s, the predominant operational instrument of the aid industry was the 'development project,' a unit of social engineering designed, funded and often managed by a donor organization or client agency. Twenty-first century aid, by contrast, is increasingly less about 'projects' and more about 'policy.' Growing volumes of aid are channelled into direct support for the national budget, or are deposited in 'basket' funds via which a range of donor agencies provide financial support to government-run sectoral programs in, for example, health, education, agriculture or civil service reform (e.g., Gould et al 1998). Donors appear to be relinquishing some degree of control over how their grants are spent in favour of the 'local ownership' of development endeavours. The trade-off has been for external donors to increase and consolidate their leverage over government policies and the concomitant allocation of public resources via national budgets. Donors may have lost visibility at the proverbial grassroots, yet by insinuating themselves firmly within the transnational policy community that oversees governmental expenditures, one could argue that aid has never had a greater impact on the management of public affairs.

Projects continue to be important as instruments of aid and consequently as units of aidnographic analysis, and we have a rich, methodologically reflective body of project ethnographies to guide further efforts along these lines. Yet the shift of the centre of gravity in the aid relationship upstream to the realm of policy has important consequences for the aid relationship. This shift is also

immensely consequential for the ethnographic study of development, and deserves some elaboration.

New modalities of aid

Recent trends in aid management have had a significant impact on the *social configuration* of the aid relationship, affecting which actors are involved, and modifying the sites and rules of interaction among the players in the field of aid.[1] At the same time, the new modalities have not changed the fundamentally lopsided power dynamic of aid. If anything, the new modalities have tended to reorganize rather than resolve these asymmetries. Recognizing the persistence of asymmetries behind the euphemistic rhetoric of partnership is also important for the ethnography of development; it has bearing on the normative basis of analysis and thus, as we will see below, on the critical issue of positionality.

A number of different processes and mechanisms contribute to the social reconfiguration of aid. Three such mechanisms might be briefly noted:[2]

(1) In many countries, the weight of aid in the national economy is growing primarily because the national economy is shrinking, absolutely (most of Africa) and/or in relative terms i.e., vis-à-vis the size of the debt burden (much of Latin America). Even in more commercially successful countries (like Vietnam), aid often competes for prominence with other sources of investment capital.[3] Indebtedness is probably the single most important explanatory variable when estimating the leverage of aid on domestic politics, and this influence has been much magnified by the recent Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief initiative. It is above all through defining and policing strict macro-economic and procedural conditions of eligibility for debt relief (and of eligibility for 'soft' credits more generally) that donors have managed to establish an institutional handhold on domestic policy processes.

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[1] The characterization of aid as a gamelike field in this connection owes much to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993).

[2] These mechanisms are examined in greater detail by Gould & Ojanen (2003).

[3] See Koponen (2003) for an overview.

(2) While multilateral creditors (led by the IMF) have tightened their grip on the budgetary and fiscal policies of 'partner' governments, bilateral aid agencies have invested considerable effort in synchronising their activities. The instruments and rhetoric of the new aid modalities have provided donors with a common vernacular for analysing and discussing recipient behavior. Under the clarion call for greater 'coordination' and 'harmonization' donors have greatly increased the amount and kind of information they share with one another. The closing of donor ranks has been further consolidated by measures of self-discipline, deliberately playing down the importance of national interests with regard to the aid market in recipient economies. This allows donors to standardize their approaches to and demands on the recipient government. A commensurate form of synchronisation can be seen in the relationship between public and private aid agencies as transnational private aid agencies (so-called International NGOs) expand the range of functions they subcontract to carry out under the auspices of aid partnerships captained by the multilateral public donors. These tendencies progress very unevenly in different contexts. Still, one clear consequence of the new ways of doing aid is that the aims and modalities of grassroots project aid – increasingly managed by private (non-governmental) agencies – are being brought into the orbit of the donor-driven policy regime.[4]

(3) All in all, the growing presence of transnational private and public actors at the core of national policy processes has led to a blurring of internal/external distinction as states and donors enter into increasingly intimate partnerships (see Harrison 2001). As of this writing, the aid community – pursuing strategic ends formulated and overseen by Washington-based agencies – exerts direct leverage on public policy and domestic politics in more than 70 countries via IMF-endorsed Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) and related instruments. For most of these countries, the preparation of a PRS is a condition for debt relied and/or for accessing external finance on concessional terms.

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[4] This is an important impetus for the processes of 'ngoization' discussed by Aida Bagic herein.

Aid as an ethnographic object

Aid, like the actors and agencies that promote it, is a multi-sited, multi-level phenomenon. It cannot be grasped on the basis of its manifestations in any one locality, or at one level of the aid industry. Aid works through individual and corporate agency, and its actions are embedded in matrices of complex social relations. The true nature of these relations is typically obscured by ideologically defined subject positions (benefactor, donor, expert, partner, recipient). Furthermore, the forms of social awareness within which this vocabulary makes sense are contradictorily embedded in *and* disconnected from domestic (i.e., national) contexts. As a result, the criteria of normative assessment intrinsic to narratives of aid have no fixed social context, and are constantly shifting. Bridging the private and the public, the local and the transnational, the formal and the informal – aid appears, in other words, to epitomise the hybrid mélange of disparate and delocalised elements so appealing to post-modern and culturalist accounts of 'late capitalism' (e.g., Burawoy 2000). The main message of these accounts for our concerns is simple: Aid has no empirical objectivity irrespective of the position of the observer.

Outline of the volume

This book encompasses multiple perspectives organized in two rather discrete sets of analyses: One focuses on texts and rhetoric, while a second reports on engagements with living actors in 'the field', i.e., at specific empirical research sites. The studies based on textual analysis are not self-evidently ethnographic, yet they play a vital role in mapping the aidnographic domain.

Rita Abrahamsen's article, 'The World Bank's Good Governance Agenda. Narratives of Democracy and Power' provides an elegant deconstruction of a development text. She argues that development is an intrinsic part of the technologies of power employed in international politics, and that the way in which it constructs democracy is central to the maintenance of contemporary international relations and structures of power. The chapter provides a close

textual analysis of the good governance agenda, and the way in which it narrates development as an absence of democracy and governance. It seeks to expose not only the discourse's conceptualisation of democracy, but also what the discourse silences and evades, the ways in which its construction of development serves to facilitate specific policies and results. This is turn enables a brief discussion of the effects of these ideas of development on larger social processes, what interventions and practices they legitimise, and also what actions and policies they delegitimise and exclude.

Des Gasper's 'Studying aid: Some methods' looks first at past ethnographies of aid, and in particular at Porter et al.'s *Development in Practice* (1991). Gasper argues that we need more than general methods in order to investigate particular interventions. To adequately study aid we have to study its languages and how they are used. To examine the policy discourses of aid we need methods for investigating concepts and arguments and for reflecting on moral and political assumptions. The essay subsequently looks at methods for specifying and presenting program designs, including the famous 'Logical Framework Approach' and more elaborate variants of 'program theory.' To illustrate, Gasper examines the assumptions behind emergency relief aid; and raises the question of under what conditions the open probing of assumptions is politically feasible. He also indicates how the upper reaches of program design lead us into political ethics and the analysis of ethical argumentation.

In their analysis of 'Catchwords, Empty Phrases & Tautological Reasoning' in Danish aid, **Henrik Secher Marcussen & Steen Bergendorff** argue that current Danish aid practices are guided by mythological notions of history, grounded in an idealized rendition of Western/Danish society. In this romanticized and historically inaccurate conception of development, the notion of democracy has been inverted from outcome to cause. By virtue of this inversion, an idealized concept of Civil Society assumes a privileged status in the development model subscribed to by the Danish aid industry. This results in belittling the central importance of the state in economic management while inflating the role of non-state actors (NGOs) as prime motors of development and democratisation. The essay highlights the natural

affinity between Danida and MS (a major private Danish development organization) in pursuing the 'mythological' goal of development via civil society.

Nisrine El Ghaziri's article, 'Policy Formulation in a Multi-Donor Aid Context' provides a close reading of the early dynamics of Lebanon's post-war reconstruction in an attempt to operationalise an ethnographic research path by looking at the reconstruction of post-war Lebanon as an aid encounter. It focuses on the policy dimension of reconstruction and analyses how the various actors in development assistance define and negotiate this policy. The years of war created a policy vacuum that the first post-war cabinets could hardly fill. Development agencies, on the other hand, not only provided the necessary resources to assist the government initiate the reconstruction, they were also strategic players whose interactions yielded significant, longer-term meaning(s) to the endeavour of 'reconstruction.' The analysis shows that the rhetoric of crisis and urgency is used to create a need for external intervention in line with the overall development agendas of the major donors. In particular, this essay argues that donors can be seen to vie for control of specific realms of economic and policy space. With an essentially weak government after years of war, the ground is set for donors to compete over how to fill the policy vacuum.

These textual analyses provide vital tools and insights for unravelling the role of narrative and rhetorical devices in the (re-)production of aid relationships at many different levels – from the sphere of centralized aid agency/governmental 'partnerships', to the dynamics of empowerment and discipline that characterise decentralised development practices. The analysis of texts alone cannot provide a full understanding of aid relationships, however. A deeper grasp of the dynamics of aid relationships requires first-hand empirical analysis – the researcher's immersion in the contexts, routines and lived experience where rehtorical concepts and normative ideals are instantiated in everyday life.

Janine Wedel's essay on "'Studying Through' a Globalizing World. Building method through aidnographies', provides a reflexive introduction to this endeavor. In her paper, the author recounts the research process and methodological resources employed in her acclaimed studies of American aid to post-socialist Eastern Europe. The essay begins with a general overview of the author's fieldwork, including research that laid the groundwork for her work on foreign aid. She then turns to how she framed her research on aid, how she began to identify the players, and employed the 'extended case study method' to follow particular cases. The analysis focuses on a web of transnational networks, located primarily in Washington D.C., and Moscow, which were activated as the Soviet Union was breaking apart. The chapter describes the methods that were employed to discover and examine these networks which crucially shaped the ways in which foreign assistance to the new Russian nation unfolded. Finally, the chapter shows how 'studying through' furnishes a framework for examining cases in which macro and micro are inherently interwoven, and for organizing the study of policy and globalization processes.

Paul Stubbs' 'Globalisation, Memory and Consultancy – towards a new ethnography of policy advice and welfare reform' furthers this methodological agenda by extending an ethnographic approach to policy to aspects of transnational policy transfers. The empirical analysis draws on examples from welfare regimes in the ex-Yugoslavian states in which external consultancy modes have recently become increasingly significant. Stubbs' unconventional ethnographic account reveals how these new, consultancy-driven policy transfers are much more multi-dimensional, confusing, and contradictory than is often portrayed in the literature on how 'external' forces are imposed on local populations, powerless to resist. On the other hand, Stubbs argues that the bland, technicist assumption of equality underpinning recent notions of policy transfers as 'partnerships' between administrators, policy makers, and professionals from two or more different countries should not be accepted as more than the ideology-in-use which it so obviously is.

The essay by **Aida Bagić**, 'Talking about donors – Women's Organizing in Post-Yugoslav Countries' interrogates the author's personal involvement in feminist organizing in the former Yugoslav space, and the need to understand the transformation of that activism – as social movements in the context of war and external assistance – into NGOs. The focus of the analysis is on the process of relationship-building between 'donors' and 'recipients' of aid, understood as a series of complex encounters. The paper discusses the ways in which international assistance has influenced the development of women's movements in the post-Yugoslav region by looking at the ways in which external influence has been conceptualized by feminist activists and members of women's organizations in the region.

The last in this cluster of field-based studies, **Malin Arvidson's** essay on 'Disputing Development Discourses: Understanding motivation and performance of local NGO staff' sketches a framework for analysing local NGOs that work as sub-contractors in rural development programmes financed by international donors. The analysis is based on a study of two development projects in Bangladesh, both of which highlight the participation and empowerment of villagers. The essay challenges conventional wisdoms about NGOs as partners in development. Drawing on debates about altruism and self-interest in organizational sociology, the author problematises the paradoxical situation of upstream aid managers who need to both motivate and control the staff of local NGOs implementing international projects.

A methodological challenge

Can aid, construed by these authors as a phenomenon both dedicated to the promotion of, and instantiated in, transnational processes, be a suitable object for ethnographic study? Gille and Ó Riain (2002: 273), for example, counsel skepticism. For them, 'ethnography explicitly seeks to analyse the social by locating the researcher in the space of the social relations being analysed, and this ability to straightforwardly access the social by going to the local becomes problematic under conditions of globalization.' While Gille and Ó Riain have a point, the problem, I would argue, is not so much with 'globalization' (which is hardly a new challenge to ethnography), as with an understanding of the

'local' that equates discrete physical place, social agency and identity (cf., Escobar 2001).

This equation is explicitly challenged by an emerging cohort of 'global ethnographers' (eg., Appadurai 1996, Burawoy 2000, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Marcus 1998), whose various endeavors question the equivalency of physical place and 'the social.' Such work suggests that aid is fair game for ethnographic analysis, and especially if aid is recognized as an exemplar of the mobile, translocal, transborder and transscalar sociality of our times. Indeed, many aspects of the view of late capitalist sociality advocated by the global ethnographers resonate with the analyses of aid relations in the empirical studies below. From this perspective, the methodological conundra confronting the study of aid are not the consequence of 'globalization' (a term which defies operational definition), but of the specific way that the social relations of aid are organized as trans-scalar practices within a political economy context that is both global and spatially non-contiguous.

The essays included here provide a variegated perspective on the narratives, players and sites via which aid relations are organized and instantiated. No attempt is made here to impose a summary on this plurality of views. Instead, **Jeremy Gould's** concluding essay on 'Positionality and scale – Methodological issues in the ethnography of aid' seeks to flesh out key methodological challenges undergirding these and kindred attempts to do aidnography. The analysis identifies two 'constitutive tensions' in the ethnography of aid: One, discussed as an issue of *positionality*, relates to the spatial, social and normative dilemma of situating oneself in the multi-sited, multi-level field of an aid relationship. The second tension relates to the problem of coming to terms with the transcendental *scale* of aid relationships when attempting ethnographic research.

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