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Praxis and paradigms of local and expatriate workers in 'Aidland'

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses practices and paradigms that expatriate and national humanitarian aid workers use to deal with major problems they encounter in their daily work. It views 'Aidland' as an arena where different actors encounter, negotiate and shape the outcome of aid. One of the main findings is that there are consistent differences in the way expatriate and national aid actors perceive problems in their field, as well as in the way they respond to these issues. The paper shows that these perceptions often translate into heterogeneous paradigms and practices between expatriate and national staff, particularly around remote control aid, partnerships and donor reporting. These findings are highly relevant in the current context of 'localisation', suggesting that the so-called North/South divide continues to exist and more explicit attention should be given in aid research to the heterogeneous strategies of different actors working in the aid sector. The paper is based on analysis of data derived from a multiple-round Delphi expert panel study involving 30 highly experienced humanitarian aid practitioners.

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Introduction

The humanitarian sector is saving more lives, caring for more wounded and feeding more hungry people in more places than ever. Yet it falls short in the world's most enduring crises.[1] This paper investigates aid effectiveness by engaging with anthropological and ethnographic studies of the aid industry (*aidnography* for short). It focuses on three major problem realms: politicisation of aid, gap in funding and demands, and lack of localisation within the aid sector.

These focal points largely overlap with what Bennett et al., in their review of critical literature on humanitarian aid, argue are major underlying reasons for aid ineffectiveness.[2] In this paper, these topics arise first and foremost from an empirical dataset which was derived from repeated in-depth interviews with 30 highly experienced aid practitioners. From this analysis, it also becomes clear that the coping practices used by practitioners to deal with these problems, can, and do, have impacts on aid effectiveness that are often unanticipated. Sometimes, the analysis suggests, they may even have an adverse effect.

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Basing the core of the analysis on empirical data, this paper takes an agency perspective to studying aid ineffectiveness, and aims to understand the ways in which practitioners perceive and deal with problems in their work. It focuses not just on actual practices but also takes into account paradigms: a particular way of understanding crisis and action. Paradigms are relevant in an analysis of aid effectiveness because they are a way of thinking that informs practice.[3] How do practitioners frame or explain particular actions and decisions? How are paradigms used to justify an action or a decision? By asking these questions, it becomes possible to understand not just *what* humanitarian actors do, but *why* they do it: underlying motivations and convictions come to the surface.

Anthony Giddens coined the term 'duality of structures' to remind us that individuals can act freely and reflexively, but only within the limits of the social structure created around them.[4] This does not mean, however, that these social structures must be regarded absolutely statically; rather, they can be changed when actors use their agency to challenge them, ignore them or replace them. Hence, if we want to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of aid, focusing on humanitarian actors' behaviour alone (micro-analysis) and on the rules and resources of the aid sector (macro-analysis) would be insufficient. What is needed, instead, is a mid-range level analysis that takes into account both structural and agency factors that impact aid effectiveness.

In the remainder of this introduction, the issues of politicisation, funding and localisation are briefly elaborated. It is important to note that the choice for focusing on three problem realms was dictated by the participants and, moreover, they have been chosen because – in the eyes of research participants – the three realms are interconnected. The literature discussion below allows for an understanding of the major structures, rules and recourses in the larger political and social context of the aid-industry vis-à-vis the practices of individual aid actors. Next, a theoretical section introduces the actor-oriented approach as a tool to establish a mid-range level analysis, and contrasts it to the 'Aidland' perspective, another stream of literature that is frequently used to study praxis and paradigms of aid workers. The theoretical section also problematises concepts that are commonly used in the literature to categorise aid actors: most particularly 'expatriate' versus 'local'. Next, drawing on these arguments, the empirical findings will highlight paradigms and practices that humanitarians with different backgrounds commonly use to deal with problems in their industry.

Major hindrances to aid effectiveness

While humanitarianism has always served geopolitical and other political interests, especially since the 'war on terror' developed after 9/11, humanitarian aid has increasingly been politicised by all (new and old) stakeholders: donors, governments, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), national and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the military, non-state authorities (e.g. political opposition parties or 'rebel groups'), the private sector and religious organisations. Each of these 'groups' can claim, or blame, aid for their own legitimation.[5] This trend has had an enormous impact on the reputation and credibility of the aid industry. Even if humanitarian actors claim to work according to humanitarian principles, they are certainly not perceived as 'neutral' or 'impartial' by host communities.[6] Humanitarians perceive their work as increasingly unsafe due to the recent politicisation of aid.[7] In response, their organisations try to protect staff through

'securitisation'.[8] This means greater investment and emphasis on improving security management,[9] or working through 'remote control aid' rather than through direct action.[10]

According to the respondents (and further elaborated in this paper), problems involving funding point to the gap between available funds and demands. In 2013, the gap between available funds and estimated global needs reached US$4.5 billion, leaving at least one-third of the demand unmet.[11] The sector thus lacks the funds to respond to the volume and complexity of current humanitarian needs. The gap only seems to widen, as key donors cut their contributions while humanitarian disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies, such as the war in Syria, grow more frequent and severe.[12]

In policy documents, the term localisation emphasises the locale of the aid recipient and responders, but according to Geoffroy and Grünewald, the concept goes far beyond that, requiring 'a shift in power relations between actors, both in terms of strategic decision-making and control of resources'.[13] In development practice, the paradigm shift to a more local and participatory approach gained momentum throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In humanitarian policy terms, the call for localisation became strongly entrenched in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and the subsequent Grand Bargain. There is a growing belief that localisation increases aid impact and improves effectiveness.[14] Initiatives like the Charter for Change and the Shifting the Power project (StP) aim for a more balanced humanitarian system, where the role of local and national humanitarian actors is valued, supported and recognised by international humanitarian agencies, donors and International NGOs. Within the sector, according to the participants, many aid actors believe that local NGOs or beneficiaries should be financed directly. Yet in 2018, the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report stated that little progress had been made with regard to localisation.[15] While the debate on localisation of humanitarian action has gained momentum in the past years, the sector has not succeeded so far in the creation of equal partnerships with, and accountability to, local populations.[16] Critics say that the reason why the localisation agenda is not implemented successfully is that it is fraught with ambiguities, takes a top-down perspective, does not specify what 'the local' is and focuses primarily on technocratic policy guidelines.[17]

Theoretical framework: a mid-range level analysis of a heterogeneous group of aid actors

In order to provide an analysis that takes into account both the praxis and paradigms of aid actors, as well as the structures within which these actors operate, this paper takes an actor-oriented approach. The actor-oriented approach was developed as a response to the overly structural analysis of aid in previous decades.[18] This approach considered aid as the outcome of the interaction of social actors struggling and negotiating to further their ideas and interests in a metaphorical arena, shaping the practices of service delivery along the way.[19] Different scholars have used the arena perspective of Long et al. to analyse case studies on humanitarian praxis in different settings: for example, everyday politics of adapting to climate change in Mozambique,[20] aid and institutions in Angola,[21] and humanitarian governance in refugee camps.[22]

Without explicitly calling their approach actor-oriented, aid scholars such as Krause, and Swidler and Watkins, have managed to take into account both individual practices and paradigms, as well as the structures in which aid actors work and to which they respond. Krause focuses on the practices of managers in large (Western) humanitarian relief NGOs,

in the context of what she considers, in line with Bourdieu, to be a humanitarian 'field'.[23] This field is shaped by a specific history, which resulted in shared assumptions and interpretations that help aid actors to select relevant information, develop activities that sit well with sponsors and produce 'good projects'. In her analysis, Krause emphasises practice and empirical observation but goes beyond individual opinions and experiences to distil patterns and specific logics of practice that exist in the humanitarian field. In their analysis of the AIDS-aid industry, Swidler and Watkins show how altruists (donors and foreign staff members working for NGOs) and brokers (Africans who mediate between foreign altruists and local people) together shape a specific culture – full of rituals, programmes and interventions.[24] In sum, holistic analyses of aid effectiveness should be mid-range level, considering both individual actions of aid actors and also structural factors that enable and limit their actions.

It then becomes important to distinguish an actor approach from another important agent-related perspective on aid that has become known as the Aidland genre.[25] Aidland is portrayed as an imaginary country, or a global bubble, which is inhabited by development organisations and the people working for them (both paid and unpaid), living and working in places close to, or far away from, their places of origin. Numerous studies were conducted by aid workers (often Northern or former), about other aid workers, or about themselves, reflecting both on their individual actions and also on those of their industry. Aidland scholars have succeeded in making the complex world and cultural dynamics that comprise 'aid work' more concrete, and therefore better understandable, for academics and other outsiders.

All scholars working on Aidland do not focus solely on the micro-level. However, Harrison has warned that traditional Aidland-literature still risks underemphasising the structures of practitioners' working environments and the ways in which this limits their actions.[26] Although some of the literature discusses the (changing) paradigms, working conditions and relationships between different aid organisations, a lot of the Aidland literature is more narrowly focused on individual praxis. The consequence, probably unintended, is that the literature suggests that ineffective aid is due to what practitioners do or don't do. This neglects the fact that aid performance is dependent on many different factors, many of them outside the direct control of practitioners. Moreover, as authors like Shutt suggest, while the discussion on aid worker's lives is insightful, it also seems useful to ask what are the specific implications of their relations and values for aid practice.[27]

However, even with a mid-range level analysis that aims to take into account individual practices, the structure in which they come about, and the implications of agent–structure interaction, there remains the risk of offering a picture of aid actors and their 'world' that is inaccurate or unrealistic. This happens all too easily when fuzzy concepts such as 'local' are used to categorise aid actors.

The distinction between who and what is local, and who or what is not, is often considered relevant with regard to the broader discussion of localisation, and to some extent it certainly is. If the recent agenda of global policymakers is to make humanitarian operations 'as local as possible and international as necessary', it becomes crucial to better understand how it is possible that the lack of localisation still remains a major hindrance to aid effectiveness in the eyes of social researchers and practitioners alike.[28] It also becomes crucial to acknowledge that aid workers who were born and raised in the region or country in which they provide aid, encounter different challenges and experiences in their work than do outsiders. In much of the literature, however, the focus has remained on what Ong has called the humanitarian archetype: an 'always-already worldly, generically cosmopolitan, globally mobile figure

operating from a position of relative strength and anonymous power vis a vis ("local", "helpless") aid recipients'. For example, Ong and Combinido note that Roth's article on Western aid workers' attraction to adrenaline-pumping 'edge work' in crisis contexts does not neatly apply to national aid actors in the global South who live in dangerous proximity to risk day to day.[29] (Note, however, that Roth herself indicates in her article that the expatriate situation is different from national staff, and in the same year published a book on inequalities between different groups of aid workers and how they are perpetuated, as well as a later article that address the differences and interactions between national and international staff.[30])

Yarrow shows in his case study of Ghanaian NGO workers how personal relations, although frowned upon by proponents of 'good governance' as potentially nepotistic and unaccountable, actually were key in upholding the NGOs' ideological and institutional autonomy in the face of threats from government and donors.[31] In a 2016 paper for Medicins sans Frontieres, Schenkenberg wrote that, particularly in open conflict settings, local practitioners face different challenges in adhering to the core humanitarian principles, due to their affiliations with the populations or violence actors, from those that expatriate staff would face.[32] And in 1995, Hugo Slim described how, 'despite being specialists who understand the history, culture, and fast-moving politics of a place', local aid workers face a 'very effective glass ceiling' that limits professional advancement and ability to influence policy.[33] This problem has not been solved in the time since then. In fact, it might have become worse. Roth has shown that while the 'professionalization of aid' that has taken place in more recent years can have positive effects for aid recipients and other actors involved in aid, it can also lead to hierarchies and disadvantage for aid actors from the Global South.[34]

For all of the above reasons, it is *en point* that Apthorpe observed that 'different aiders […] live with different Aidlands', and also that different scholars have explored the specific positionality of local aid workers and reviewed the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges they face.[35] The problem is, though, that the literary distinction that is often made between 'expatriate' and 'local' aid-workers is unhelpful and unrealistic.[36] For example, many of the people who are called 'local' NGO-development workers in the literature are in reality raised or trained in the North, or come from a different country or region from where their employers' head office or field office is located. On the other hand, many expatriates might claim that they have lived for a long time in countries far away from their place of origin and that they have become 'insiders'. Moreover, not all 'expatriates' come from the Global North. A large number of 'expatriate' aid workers come from Southern countries and thus work in a similar context to their own.

It thus appears rather unhelpful to use labels such as 'local' in an analysis of the aid sector. Instead, scholars could try to pay attention to the more complex backgrounds different aid actors may have, and to the roles and hierarchies that are related to that positionality. Scholars before me have noted that local aid workers often function as brokers that can smooth the divide between aid agencies and their clients.[37] Their experiences are different from those of expatriate colleagues *on account of that role*. Others have observed that national staff proximity to the aid regime may lead to tensions with local recipient communities – again, it appears that it is the *positionality* of the aid actor, rather than the national or ethnic background per se, that is relevant for the analysis.

For this reason, in this paper, the regional background of interviewees will be described where relevant, as well as the hierarchic position that they take within their organisations as well as the staff member's national or expatriate background. Although this research did

not set out to distinguish between expatriate and national staff initially, the differences in their opinions and narrated experiences were so systematic that it seemed relevant to consider overlaps and differences between expatriate and national staff. It is hoped that the explicit but nuanced attention in this paper to heterogeneity will encourage aid scholars to come to a more differentiated and context-sensitive understanding of aid work.

Methodology

This paper records the insights that were drawn from two rounds of an expert panel, in which key humanitarian actors with at least seven years of experience in the field were interviewed. The expert panel was part of a larger research project on humanitarian aid in settings of conflict and disaster. The goal was to establish an informed, evidence-based study about some of the most pressing challenges that are currently hampering the effectiveness of aid, as well as to collect observations of highly experienced practitioners on trends and recent experiences in the field.

A Delphi method was used, which has a cyclical research design with several rounds of questioning. Thirty qualified experts (the number of participants was based on recommendations from the literature on the Delphi technique) were selected through a snowballing method. First, a committee of highly-experienced practitioners and aid scholars, most of them having a Northern background, was asked whom they believed were well-experienced 'reflective practitioners' that should be approached for an interview, and then each selected participant was asked for new, highly recommended names.

In the first round of the research, participants were interviewed in open, semi-structured ways for one to three hours over Skype or face-to-face. The questions concerned the experiences of practitioners in the field, in settings of disaster and conflict. Specifically, it was interesting to understand what are, in their opinion, important trends in the humanitarian sectors, such as the most pressing challenges to (more) effective aid, the factors underlying these challenges, and the solutions that practitioners sought and perhaps found. Programmes or interventions that went really well or contributed to effective aid were also of interest, and the related success-factors. In the second round, the questions were followed up with additional questions by email or phone based on the analysis of the interviews that were held in the first round.

The advantage of the cyclical structure of a Delphi study is that it allows participants to reflect on their earlier answers and it allows the researcher to ask additional questions throughout the interview process if these appear relevant. Moreover, it avoids the potential negative consequences of a group interview and it allows people to speak openly and thoughtfully.[38] All interviewees remained anonymous to other participants, so that everybody could speak freely. Interviews were recorded in 2017, directly transcribed and stored in the software analysis program NVivo, together with the audiofiles. A full report of the analysis is available elsewhere.[39]

Fifty per cent of the participants was male, 50% female; ages ranged from 32 to 65. Participants had varying national backgrounds: the USA, Spain, UK, Poland, Slovakia, the Netherlands, France, Kenya, India, South Sudan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Japan and Colombia. Seventeen were expatriates, of which 15 were from the Global North, and two from the Global South working in the region. The other 13 participants were Southern

national humanitarians meaning they were raised in, are still based in and work in the Global South. Panellists worked for organisations including MSF, ICRC, Save the Children, Oxfam Novib, Adeso, UNICEF, UNOCHA, WFP, MercyCorps, CoARC, Action against Hunger, SEED India, Lebanon-support, Community Healthcare Initiative, CARE, AAR and AMEL. The settings in which they were professionally engaged in humanitarian aid are Afghanistan, Lebanon, Nepal, Liberia, India, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Darfur, Haiti, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Iraq, Colombia, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey and Somalia.

Panellists were asked about the ways in which they had dealt with problems in their field and to reflect on the motives behind these decisions: why did they choose this strategy and not another? Who or what was impacting their actions? Looking back, would they have acted differently? What would be the ideal scenario? What were the effects of their actions, on the problem discussed and on aid effectiveness as a whole?

The first round of interviews highlighted pressing problems and trends in the field, as discussed in the introduction and mentioned above. The second round of interviews focused on the narratives that panellists used to speak about solutions they have tried to seek in order to deal with problems in their field. Here it became clear that, while expatriate and national aid actors spoke about similar topics, the paradigms and strategies they used were consistently different: this point will be elaborated throughout the findings.

Findings

Both the expatriate and national aid actors most often mentioned 'remote control aid' as a strategy to deal with problems of politicisation of aid and the related impacts on staff security. This was followed by an overt emphasis on principles: both strategies are discussed below.

Remote control and localisation

Without exception, all panellists observed that, both in their own organisation and amongst other organisations that they encounter in the field, remote control is increasingly used to deliver aid in regions that are considered too dangerous for, and by, expatriate staff. In some cases, this means that the organisation sends support from another country and partners up with local organisations to handle the aid upon arrival. In others, it means that an organisation manages the delivery from a safe spot (e.g. a protected compound in the capital) and subcontracts aid to local aid actors who are willing to take more risks.

While expatriate aid actors (those with a Northern, as well as those with a Southern background) framed remote control aid as a genuine partnership and hence an example of successful localisation, national aid actors framed remote management as a form of sub-contracting and hence as clear evidence for the divide between the North and South. The following two quotes typify the *expatriate* point of view:

Country director, male, 42:

> 'I do a lot with remote control aid nowadays. This is such a big step: finally, it's no longer us delivering the aid! It's our local partners. And those types of partnerships – I think that they should be the future of the aid industry'.

Programme manager working in the region but not in mother country, female, 47:

> 'Oh, yes, I have some really good examples of partnerships with local organisations, here. […] I basically hire them, to deliver the boxes in conflict areas that I can't access due to security reasons. […] It's remote control aid'.

National practitioners generally agreed that remote control aid can offer a solution in high conflict scenarios, but they were very critical about the way in which this type of aid management was being implemented. They expressed frustration with their expatriate colleagues as they are said to maintain ownership in these arrangements. For them, remote control aid all too often resembles subcontracting, rather than equal partnerships. In the words of the director of an NGO, aged 63:

> They send us a contract and call it localisation. But it's them who decide what is going to happen, when and how. We were not invited to work on the programme design. We are just paid to implement it, because we take greater risks than they do. But it is not a partnership. You're a researcher. If you pay a student to type out your interview notes, is that a partnership?

It is interesting to note that both expatriates (with Northern and Southern backgrounds alike) and national humanitarians shared the concern that remote control aid is hard to monitor. Both groups also mentioned ethical objections to remote control aid, particularly in circumstances where the argument that the environment may be less risky for local staff, than for expatriate staff, may not apply. The pros and cons of increased remote control aid have been discussed elsewhere.[40] It is also widely known that there exists a large variety of relationships between national and international agencies that co-engage in remote control aid. Some are genuine and equal and based on many years of trust building; some less so.[41] What these findings contribute to this stream of literature is the observation that the way in which remote control aid is *perceived* by humanitarians differs greatly among expatriate staff and staff with national backgrounds.

Expatriates usually regarded their remote management projects as less-than-ideal-but-better-than-nothing and, importantly, as examples of successful localisation and partnerships with local humanitarian actors. By contrast, actors with a national background emphasised that remote control aid is hardly ever based on equal partnerships. From Lebanon to Afghanistan, from Liberia to South Sudan, actors shared case studies where local NGOs are being subcontracted by INGOs to carry out projects for them, but don't get ownership of these projects. National practitioners find they have little to say in these projects and therefore there is hardly room for local innovation. From that perspective, the fact that the tendency of expatriates (with a Northern and a Southern background alike) to frame the 'largely unknowns' that are remote operations as equal partnerships, serves to convey an image of control and comfort.

Emphasising/rejecting neutrality

Another common strategy that the large majority (28/30) of the panellists used in order to deal with the problem of politicisation was to emphasise their own ability to act neutrally and impartially in conversations with colleagues and recipients. Humanitarian principles were frequently mentioned with respect to stakeholders in the field, most importantly conflict actors and donors, as well as recipients and colleagues in the field and/or office.

Asked why they have made this repetition of the 'neutrality' narrative a habit, humanitarians often replied by saying that in order for the sector to become more credible and effective, humanitarians have to be neutral and impartial. They then contrasted their own ability to act neutrally with explanations about other aid actors, who were said to experience more difficulties with adhering to humanitarian principles: this was done by both expatriates and nationals, but in opposing ways.

For example, almost all expatriate interviewees (14 out of 16) strongly agreed with the assumption that international (expatriate) staff and agencies are neutral actors; 13 out of 16 expatriates added that national partners could never be truly 'neutral' because of their ethnic or clan background. This opinion was shared by expatriates with a Northern and with a Southern background.

National actors, in contrast, emphasised that they were most knowledgeable about inequalities and tensions that often exist between and within host communities, while expatriates typically miss these nuances and in that way unknowingly disadvantage or advantage some recipients over others. In other words, it is possible for nationals to be neutral and impartial because they *recognise* inequalities and lingering conflict in their country that may remain undiscovered by expatriates. It was also often expressed by national humanitarians that expatriates and the INGOs they work for are under pressure from international politics including attempts to counter poverty and terrorism and, hence, are not in a neutral position at all. This was claimed to be less the case for local and national NGOs, who can sometimes work more or less autonomously. National practitioners would typically make remarks such as:

Field officer, male, 35:

> All those INGOs – they work with our government; their programmes are controlled by the government. If the government does not want them to go to a certain area, they won't allow them to. And INGOs don't complain because otherwise they're being kicked out of the country. What is neutral about that?

Director, female, 47:

> It seems that there is an automatic assumption that if you are an insider, you cannot be neutral. I take offence to that, because it assumes that only Northern, white people, can be neutral. And it's bull! I constantly see non-neutral whites! They come here and have already formed their opinions and allies and think one group is better than another.

This clearly contrasts with excerpts taken from interviews with expatriate panel members:

Office manager, born in the region but not working in mother country, male, 37:

> Our international staff was trained in the principles. The local staff, people from this country – I try to train them, but they have family here, or live in the communities we work with. So even if they understand the principles, it's difficult for them to actually adhere to them.

Office manager, female, 41:

> Oh, yes, we are 100% neutral! I personally have nothing to do with the conflict, other than professionally helping whoever is wounded or needs help.

Coordinator, male, 37:

> I strictly work through the humanitarian principles. That is the problem with my local staff. They don't even know what the principles are. I come in the office and I hear them talking about

> "those rebels", and I tell them: "You cannot speak like that. You may think that, but you cannot say that in this office". Not sure if that really resonates, though [laughs].

Whether or not these ideas are correct is not relevant here. Rather, this paper aims to draw attention to the habit of distinguishing or 'othering' that is practised by both expatriate and national staff. The advantage of this strategy might be that it helps aid workers keep up an idea about themselves, that they *are* 'neutral' and hence doing 'the right thing'. In other words: if the aid sector is in a crisis, *they* are not to blame – only 'outsider' colleagues are, whether they be outsider to the country or outsider to the 'professional' aid world.

A less common strategy to emphasise humanitarian principles was also mentioned by nine out of 30 interviewees: six (Northern) expatriates and three nationals. This strategy concerned overtly distancing one's agency and staff from national soldiers or UN employees working in the same region. Two expatriate practitioners explained that while they frequently negotiate and cooperate with military personnel in an attempt to increase security for their staff (for example they ask for security advice or for extra patrols around the compound), they make an effort not to be seen with any of these people in public. They overtly deny they have anything to do with these actors, or/and underline to local staff, guards and recipients that humanitarians are 'different' from UN staff or soldiers. Humanitarians with national backgrounds typically used the same strategy.

In summary, expatriate and national humanitarians increasingly feel the need to protect the 'neutral' status of their agency. Protection of the neutrality image happens in daily practice through regular emphasis on humanitarian principles towards stakeholders in the field, most importantly to conflict actors and donors. While both expatriate and national humanitarians use these strategies, they do so in opposing ways: each 'group' emphasises their own neutrality and contrasts it with the inability of their colleagues to be neutral and impartial.

Creative funding and differing transparency towards donors

As mentioned in the introduction, while humanitarian organisations have never before received so much funding, the type of disasters and emergencies they currently deal with are so many and complex that many of them are in a constant search for more money.[42] This applies to both INGOs and NGOs, although the latter usually have more problems in obtaining funding directly from donors.

Without exception, the national practitioners participating in this study indicated they have much difficulty in getting funding from large donors because it is hard for them to adhere to the language and jargon requirements. This specific problem was not shared by the majority of expatriate staff – except for those with a Southern background, who indicated that they sometimes also struggle with the language and technical jargon demands of donors. The majority of them, however, emphasised different donor-related problems of earmarked donor funding or bureaucratic challenges – which can create the problem that funds need be requested long before they are needed for practitioners and recipients. Trying to obtain funding in this slow and complex financial climate, expatriate and national practitioners indicated that they often find creative ways to get funding and use it flexibly. All study participants (including nationals and expatriates from North and South) explained that they are frequently less transparent about their actual activities in donor reports.

Examples of their creative strategies varied from person to person: some concrete examples are provided below. It is interesting to note that the strategies to get access to funding and the attempts to cover up things that may prevent donors from providing funding are often described as 'professionalisation' – by both nationals and expatriates.

About a quarter of the panel members had started recently to try and get more private funding for their organisations, rather than funding from institutional donors, to avoid the difficulties with earmarked donor money. They have hired special staff for this task and in one case even set up a whole department to actively seek funding from the private sector. Several expatriate panel members admitted writing reports in a style that is so jargon-technical that national (field) staff hardly understand or use it, but 'it impresses the donors'. This strategy was also used by about half of the national humanitarians (eight out of 15). Another strategy used by expatriates and nationals had to do with labelling money. Three (Northern) expatriates and two national humanitarians always keep a little bit of money separate in their account labelled very broadly or vaguely, so that it can be used for a sudden crisis or a sensitive issue even if donor funding rules do not allow for such flexibility.

Finally, the majority of panellists (25 out of 30) feel forced to spend more time on communication and PR towards their donors and host governments about their 'success', than on accountability towards recipients, who at most get to fill in an evaluation form or are invited to complain during a short meeting with staff and the community. While all of the above funding strategies were used by nationals as well as by expatriates, differences became obvious when it came to openness towards donors. Most of the expatriates indicated that they had a very good relationship with their donors, in which they could talk openly about problems encountered in the field without having to fear that financial support would be withdrawn. Consider, for example, these two quotes:

Country director, male, 42:

> I go and have beers with our donors on a regular basis. I tell them what I am doing, even the things that you wouldn't necessarily share with the broader audience. For example, if we are negotiating with local militias in order to get access to a region. People don't like that, usually, they think I have to stay away from conflict actors. But that's not the reality. And our sponsor knows that, they encourage us to be frank and they continue to support us because they trust I know what I am doing.

Programme manager from the region but not working in mother country, female, 47:

> I can be open to the donors, even about the problems I have here with staff […] Drinking in the field is a common problem in this country [And] I sometimes have to pay conflict actors in order to get access. Sure, donors know we struggle with those things, but they trust I deal with it in the correct way and have committed to supporting us nevertheless.

These trustful relations contrast starkly with the experiences of national practitioners, who indicated that they are not always transparent towards their donors, out of fear of losing financial support.

Project manager, male, 37:

> Of course, we struggle with projects. They don't work as we expected them to work, recipients complain because we are late – this happens all the time when they live in remote areas or during conflicts where we have to move slow […] No, I don't always report [laughs]. That's not

what donors deem professional. If you'd tell donors how difficult it is to implement their project, they will just say you're incapable.

Country director, female, 42:

You have to be careful in what you report to donors, you understand? Like, what if field staff is corrupt? It happens. Our lowest-level field staff get paid poorly, so this is to be expected … But if it happens to us, then suddenly our whole organisation is considered corrupt. While it happens all the time in INGOs, also. But no, of course, this is not typically what you write about in reports [laughs].

In summary, both national and expatriate practitioners, including expatriates from the South, struggle with funding and find creative strategies to cope. One example is the tweaking of language in verbal and written donor reports, another is finding new streams of money (which is working around the problem, rather than demanding that it be solved). Both groups commonly adhere to using a specific jargon to impress donors and they spend resources on communication with donors and upward accountability. Different strategies are used by expatriates and locals when it comes to openness towards donors. While expatriates (Northern and Southern alike) indicate they can be honest towards donors about struggles in implementation of projects, nationals indicate they try to hide problems and concerns from their funders as they feel more openness would threaten their finances.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with a genre in anthropology's scrutinisation of humanitarian aid – Aidland – which focuses attention on the perceptions, actions and individual strategies of 'development professionals'. It also deals with important criticism of this genre which holds that an overly narrow ethnographic focus on aid actors runs the risk of overlooking the significance of the power relations and other structures within which the aid actors are embedded, as well as their impacts on aid. The paper also problematised the fact that much of the current aid literature fails to distinguish between expatriate and national development workers, or uses vague concepts such as 'local' and 'international'. In line with scholars such as Long, Hilhorst and Jansen, Krause, Swidler and Watkins, this research aimed to use a mid-range analysis, emphasising practice and empirical data but also looking for patterns and specific logics of practice in particular social worlds.

The findings are limited in four main ways. First, there are many different ways in which individual practitioners cope with problems in their sector. This paper only discussed some of the patterns and most common strategies: more are discussed elsewhere.[43] Second, only 30 experts participated in the panel: that number is far too small to make general statements but calls for larger, follow-up research. A third limitation of this research was that among the expatriates, almost all had a Northern background. With more Southern/regional expatriates in the panel, findings might have been different. Fourth, the research included only formally hired and paid staff members and did not include the many brokers and other actors who are typically engaged in aid.

That said, the research did come up with several findings that contribute to the debate on aid-effectiveness. First of all, while some strategies to cope with problems in the sector

are used by expatriate and national staff alike, it became clear that many problems are perceived and approached in a systematically different way by expatriate and national aid workers. This was reflected in narratives about actual practices (for example, about the ways in which practitioners try to deal with the difficulties of obtaining funding) and also in expressed ideas and paradigms about the status of the aid sector (for example, the extent to which practitioners believe that 'localisation' is already occurring, or remains a far-away ideal).

Differences in experience between different groups of aid actors is by no means new: Apthorpe emphasised that different aiders live with different 'Aidlands'.[44] Scholars like Slim, Hilhorst and Jansen have also shown that the 'aid-arena' is a social world inhabited by many different aid actors, who negotiate a certain outcome.[45] These differences are also the reason why scholars like Ong have criticised the fact that Roth's article about 'edge-work' in Aidland does not describe the lifeworld of aid actors with Southern backgrounds. This research made a relevant contribution to the debate by including aid actors from both Southern and Northern regions and it thus takes account of differentiated experiences. Another contribution has to do with the fact that this paper problematised the categories 'local' versus 'international' – two commonly-used concepts in studies of aid. Acknowledging that many 'local' aid actors don't come from the country in which they provide aid but from neighbouring countries in the region, and acknowledging at the same time that some international aid workers don't come from the Global North (as still often seems to be assumed) but instead from the South, this paper proceeded with a categorisation that allowed for more complexity, and distinguished 'nationals' from 'expatriates' with either a Northern or a Southern background. This offered a more nuanced perspective on heterogeneous experiences within the arena of Aidland.[46]

Regarding the issue of funding access, nationals struggled, for example, with the language and technical jargon demands of donors, an issue that was also brought up by Southern expatriates, but not by expatriates from the Global North. This finding resonates with findings of Fechter and Roth who have both shown that the recent 'professionalisation of aid work' has led to hierarchies and has disadvantaged aid actors from the Global South.[47]

The finding furthermore suggests that practitioners with different backgrounds share logics that characterise '*a*' humanitarian social world or 'field', but that it would be dangerous to describe their Aidland as '*the*' humanitarian field. One clear example of these heterogeneous experiences is the behavioural pattern shared by national panellists which is to keep silent about things that they expected would limit their access to donor funds. Somewhat in line with what Krause describes, these humanitarians in this study feel forced to report only on successful or, in Krause's words, 'good projects', and explained that being open about what might be perceived as a failure by donors, was 'just not how things work'.[48] This shared 'taken-for-grantedness', as Sidler and Watkins might describe it, wasn't shared amongst expatriate panellists whether from a Northern or a Southern background.[49] Perhaps this has to do with the fact that expatriates who work outside their country of origin have generally enjoyed greater travel experience and/or interaction with (Northern) donors. Alternatively, perhaps it has to do with the fact that it is easier for outsiders than for people working in their country of origin not to feel personally responsible for things that go wrong with local staff or projects. Future research that goes deeper into the underlying motivations of practitioners would be needed to grasp the reasons for their heterogeneous behaviour. But this study indicates that it is important to consider the existence of many different humanitarian fields within the broader humanitarian sector. This research was inspired by scholars like

Krause, and Swidler and Watkins, who emphasise practice and empirical observation, but go beyond individual opinions and experiences to distil patterns and specific logics of practice that exist in the humanitarian field.[50] Even beyond that, it is also important to keep an eye out for the different humanitarian fields that may exist between practitioners with different national or ethnic backgrounds. Had Monika Krause broadened her study towards non-Western organisations or non-Northern managers, she may have found rather different logics and patterns.

A final finding that is worth mentioning is the consistent difference in perceptions that was found between expatriate and national actors on the themes of localisation and remote aid. Perceptions of expatriate staff that the cooperation is perceived by both sides as 'equal' appeared incorrect in the light of opinions expressed by national practitioners: if humanitarians agree that 'localisation' is the way to go, they will have to give ownership and co-design opportunities to national parties, rather than simply have them implement tasks. Remote management aid programmes in which local organisations merely have an implementing role and lack ownership, are clearly hardly equal and hence don't bring the ideal of 'localisation' any closer. A solution to the problem is not easy to provide, but awareness and wider acknowledgement that a North/South divide still exists (and it may be much bigger than many humanitarians with a Northern background wish) is one small step ahead. For national practitioners, it appears important to express their frustration more openly towards their expatriate colleagues. The fact that many Northern expatriate interviewees genuinely seemed to believe that their remote control aid projects reflected good examples of localisation indicates that they are sometimes oblivious to the frustrations of their Southern colleagues.

One important conclusion is that the rise of securitisation elevates subcontracting as partnerships in a new orthodoxy of remote control aid that promotes empowerment through 'localisation'. This vision has the advantage that aid is not fully withdrawn in places where people may need it the most. But there is also a risk in that by claiming the confluence of localisation and remote aid, the North/South gap is not only maintained, but endowed with a moral legitimacy and celebrated as the elusive win-win solution for which the humanitarian aid community continues to search. The findings of this research thus indicate that it may be wise for expatriate humanitarian agencies to reconsider the ways in which they cooperate with national counterparts.

Despite the differences in their logics and practices, the different groups of aid actors also had things in common. Most importantly, it appeared that all groups had the habit of distinguishing or 'othering' between 'their own type' of background and practitioners with different backgrounds. One might say, once more in line with Krauses' analysis, that this was a shared logic or practice in the humanitarian work-culture or field. Expatriates would, for example, generally consider themselves as more 'neutral' and knowledgeable about the humanitarian principles than national colleagues. This was the case for Northern and Southern expatriates alike; the underlying shared logic or 'taken-for-grantedness' seemed to be that it was easier for outsiders not to become personally involved in a conflict or disaster-setting. National practitioners, however, would often remark that they – exactly because of their intimate knowledge of the country and context – were better able to act in a 'just' way. The advantage of this strategy might be that it helps aid workers keep up an idea about themselves, that they *are* 'neutral' and hence doing 'the right thing'. In other words, if the aid sector is in a crisis, *they* are not to blame – only colleagues are. This finding suggests that

popular analytical categorisations like 'local' and 'international' are oversimplified. It appears more insightful to trace perceptions of insiders and outsiders in an analysis of Aidland(s): that is, insiders of the social and political context, and insiders of the 'professional' aid sector.

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Notes

1. Bennett et al., *Time to Let Go*, 4.
2. Ibid., 56.
3. Hilhorst, "Arenas Revisited," 31.
4. Giddens, "Central Problems in Social Theory," 69.
5. Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*, 7–9: Brown and Grävingholt, *The Securitisation of Expatriate Aid*, 3.
6. Bennett et al., *Time to Let Go*, 3.
7. Aid Workers Security Report, "Behind the Attacks," 1; Donini, *The Golden Fleece*, 2–15: Sandstrom, "Remoteness and 'Demonitored Space,'" 286–302.
8. Guidero, "Humanitarian, Development, and Private Security," 11.
9. Collinson and Duffield, "Paradoxes of Presence," 20; Fisher, "Reproducing Remoteness," 112; Smirl, "Building the Other," 236–53: Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*, 2.
10. Hofman and Perache, "From Remote Control to Remote Management," 1177–93.
11. Bennett et al., *Constructive Deconstruction*, 12.
12. Barnett and Walker, "Regime Change for Humanitarian Aid," 130–41.
13. Geoffroy and Grunewald, "More than the Money," 4.
14. ODI, "Localisation in Humanitarian Practice," 1–7: Reliefweb, "Localisation of Aid," 6, 15.
15. UNOCHA, "Global Humanitarian Assistance Report," 5.
16. Barnett and Walker, "Regime Change for Humanitarian Aid," 130–41.
17. Melis, "Questioning 'the Local' in 'Localisation,'" 1.
18. Long, *Development Sociology. Actor Perspectives*, 19.
19. Hilhorst and Jansen, "Humanitarian Space as Arena," 1119.
20. Artur and Hilhorst, "Everyday Realities of Climate Change," 530.
21. Hilhorst and Serrano, "The Humanitarian Arena in Angola, 1975–2008," 184.

22. Jansen, "Between Vulnerability and Assertiveness," 569–87.
23. Krause, *The Good Project*, 11, 28, 137.
24. Swidler and Watkins, *A Fraught Embrace*.
25. Apthorpe, "With Alice in Aidland," 199.
26. Harrisson, "Beyond the Looking Glass?" 264–5.
27. Shutt, "A Moral Economy?" 1529.
28. OCHA, "As Local as Possible," 1.
29. Ong and Combinido, "Local Aid Workers," 88.
30. Roth, "Aid Work as Edgework," 4; Roth, *The Paradoxes of Aidwork*; Roth, "*Linguistic Capital*," 38–54.
31. Yarrow, *Development Beyond Politics*, 238.
32. Schenkenberg, *The Challenges of Localised Humanitarian Aid*, 23.
33. Slim, "The Continuing Metamorphosis," 111, 121.
34. Roth, "Professionalisation Trends and Inequality," 1460–1.
35. Apthorpe, "With Alice in Aidland," 199.
36. Roth, *The Paradoxes of Aid Work*, 3.
37. Hilhorst et al., "Aid Relations and Aid Legitimacy," 1441.
38. Okili and Pawlowski, "The Delphi Method," 2, 5; Turoff and Linstone, *The Delphi Method*, 3, 33.
39. Van Voorst and Hilhorst, "Humanitarian Action in Disaster and Conflict Settings."
40. Donini and Maxwell, "From Face-to-Face to Face-to-Screen," 389.
41. Hilhorst and Pereboom, "Multi-Mandate Organisations in Humanitarian Aid," 200.
42. Bennett et al., *Time to Let Go*, 4; Bennett et al., *Constructive Deconstruction*, 12.
43. Van Voorst and Hilhorst, "Humanitarian Action in Disaster," 3.
44. Apthorpe, "With Alice in Aidland," 199.
45. Slim, "The Continuing Metamorphosis," 121, 111; Hilhorst and Jansen, "Humanitarian Space as Arena," 1119.
46. Ong and Combinido, "Local Aid Workers," 33.
47. Fechter, "Living Well," 1476; Roth, "Professionalisation Trends and Inequality," 1459.
48. Krause, *The Good Project*.
49. Swidler and Watkins, *A Fraught Embrace*, 58.
50. Krause, *The Good Project*; Swidler and Watkins, *A Fraught Embrace*.

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