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An ethnography of evaluation in Afghanistan

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Publication date

2017

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Holtrop, T. J. (2017). *Questions and Answers: An ethnography of evaluation in Afghanistan*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE: PRESENTING AFGHANISTAN IN THE NETHERLANDS

Abstract

This paper is about a series of meetings organized around the presentation of the evaluation report, discussed in the previous article, in 2010. I describe four meetings — a press conference, a meeting about ongoing development, a lobby meeting, and a round table discussion — to specify the different ways in which meetings bring certain versions of developmental success and failure into being. The ethnography intends to expand Mosse's claim that success and failure are conceptual achievements oriented towards maintaining policy coherence rather than practical achievements in the realm of development operations. While it may indeed be the case that the realms of development policy and development operations work according to distinct logics, to argue that success is a conceptual achievement is to underestimate the amount of practical work that goes into the conceptual and the other way around. I will use the meeting as an analytical lens to show how success and failure are done in ways that are simultaneously conceptual and practical, according to logics of accountability, exploration and political lobby.

Keywords: *meetings, evaluation, success, failure, conceptual, practical, Afghanistan*

INTRODUCTION

SOMETIME IN THE FALL OF 2010 THE DAY STARTED AT 8:30 AM IN THE LOBBY of a hotel in The Hague in The Netherlands. Those gathered there were three staff members from the Afghanistan Peacebuilding and Stabilization Unit of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Naqeeb and Ajmal who were the directors of Mediating Research (MR), an Afghan research organization, and me, their assistant. Over coffee and croissants the staff members walked Naqeeb, Ajmal and me through the three-day program of meetings and presentations they had put together around the release of the report the Afghan research organization had written. This report had evaluated the four-year Dutch military and developmental presence in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan and it was commissioned by the Dutch embassy in Kabul. As the organization's Dutch intern, I had contributed to the research and writing of the report and I was asked to be present during the meetings as Naqeeb and Ajmal's assistant.

This article is about the series of meetings that were organized around the presentation of this evaluation report in the fall of 2010. I describe four meetings to analyze the different ways in which meetings bring certain versions of developmental success and failure into being. The ethnography intends to expand Mosse's claim (2004, 2005) that developmental success and failure are conceptual achievements oriented towards maintaining coherence with development policy rather than practical achievements in the realm of development operations. Mosse's argument goes against the established idea that policy defines the goals of development operations and that the field transforms this policy into reality while this transformation is subsequently measured and translated into a statement of developmental success or failure. Instead, Mosse understands development policy and development operations to be two realms that work according to different logics. What makes for good policy, he contends, doesn't make for good field operations. This is because success is not an external state that is measured, but a social practice of interpretation which is done through securing the support for a particular framing of the project. As soon as this support withers away, the interpretation fades and the development project loses reality and fails. This failure, it should be repeated, is a conceptual and interpretative matter, situated in the realm of policy: it may well be the case that the project has had positive effects on the ground. In order to keep projects afloat rather than see them end, countering potential interpretive statements of failure requires conceptual, interpretive work. It is in the context of this conceptual work that evaluation studies have a role (Mosse, 2005).

It is Mosse's distinction between the conceptual and the practical that I want to challenge in this article. While I support his claim that the realm of policy and the realm of development opera-

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

tions work according to different logics, to describe this distinction as one between the conceptual and the practical doesn't do justice to just how practical the conceptual is — and vice versa. In other words, logics are practiced, and the way we “frame” development in policy terms needs “doing” as well. While Mosse is interested in developmental success and failure as done in institutional practice — and he indeed briefly refers to the interpretive work of brokers and translators — we don't read about the particular doing of this work. Without learning how exactly translations work in practice, the effect of Mosse's style of arguing is that development success appears to be a conceptual achievement only, rendered as the process of attaching interests to an interpretive model in order to safeguard policy's coherence.

Brown, Reed and Yarrow (forthcoming) provide a useful way to think practically about bureaucratic knowledge production and in particular about meetings. We are used to thinking of meetings as exemplifications of broader issues or we disregard them in favor of the textual agendas or minutes that go along with them. However, these authors argue instead that meetings can be examined as ethnographic objects; they are crucial events where bureaucratic knowledge is made and the authors have started a glossary of ways in which this is practically done. I will use their shift from meeting as setting to meeting as analytical lens onto the making of bureaucratic knowledge. This will help me to argue that doing success and failure is simultaneously conceptual and practical. Attention to the interaction between the way success and failure are framed and done will show that development evaluations do not exist outside of the practices in which they come to matter. It is in specific events that they emerge. Attending to the specificities of meetings helps to think about success and failure not as organized around the opposition between policy and field, or the conceptual and the practical, but around various distinct logics — here accountability, exploration and persuasion — that “do framing” and “frame doing” all the way down.

Before moving on to the discussion of the meetings, a little more background: Naqeeb and Ajmal arrived to a somewhat tense situation in The Netherlands. The Dutch mission in Uruzgan had been a contentious topic ever since it was first brought up in 2005. When NATO asked The Netherlands to contribute to its mission, Dutch politics received its request with reservations, most of all the PvdA (the “labor party”: the Dutch social democrats party). Beginning in 2006, the PvdA, however, changed its tone and supported the government's decision to send a Dutch mission. After a reconnaissance mission in the beginning of 2006 — supported by intelligence from the same Afghan research organization that would end up evaluating the mission four years later — 1400 Dutch troops were stationed in Uruzgan. The Dutch style of intervention integrated development, diplomacy and military approaches, initially stabilizing a small core from which in time stability and security were supposed to spread like an inkblot. This style was unusual compared to other

MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE

missions, but when it started to yield favorable results towards 2008, it gained much international acclaim with even president Obama heralding the Dutch approach as a blueprint for future international missions (Wall Street Journal, 2009). Two years later, the Dutch government had to decide about an extension of the mission. The PvdA wanted to end it in 2010, as it believed its constituency didn't support an extension and the party depended on their votes in the upcoming elections. In a long and dramatic meeting in February 2010, the cabinet fell because the parties could not come to an agreement about an extension of the Dutch mission in Uruzgan. New elections were announced for June 2010. Uruzgan became a hot topic that no one wanted to burn their fingers on. It was this politically charged situation that Naqeeb and Ajmal arrived to in the fall of 2010.

THE PRESS CONFERENCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The press conference was held next door to the Parliament in The Hague. Naqeeb's presentation had required a lot of preparation. I had been in The Netherlands at the time but had assisted with similar presentations in other evaluation projects before. The effects on the audience, the accuracy of the representation and the format of the press conference had been carefully balanced. The evaluation had already been calibrated between the Dutch embassy and our organization during the writing of the report. Sentences in the report about "the uncertain future of Uruzgan after the Dutch departure", or "a security vacuum that the Taliban has been readily exploiting", and "the steady trend of improvement in Uruzgan may no longer be as smooth as anticipated" had been changed when the Dutch embassy had questioned their salience. The new storyline had turned the Dutch into actors who were more in control and aware of the Uruzgan reality, who had carefully thought through the intervention and, as a result, had achieved many good things and anticipated the inevitable, negative effects.

The Dutch effects on Uruzgani governance were framed with similar care. There had been objections against the Dutch efforts to balance tribal power in the government of Uruzgan, inviting weak tribes to the table to create a dialogue. Critics considered these efforts artificial and not sustainable. In line with the report the presentation had a different tone: "despite a concerted effort by the Dutch, Australian and American governments, 4 years is not enough to train a civil servant culture in Uruzgan". In the latter statement, the Dutch were not to blame for the lack of success of their strategy. Instead, change of governmental culture was thought to be a difficult task for development ("it just takes time to develop a government structure") or a problem inherent in the context of life in Uruzgan where people were thought to be so behind in understanding how a government is supposed to work.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

My point is not to say that these statements were false or true. Bourgoin and Muniesa (2016) write about the preparation of a consultancy slideshow and argue that the consultants did not follow a singular signification of reality, but instead balanced different concerns with regards to the layout of the presentation, the accuracy of it as a referential object and the effect of the presentation for its audience. This preparation had been a similar process of taking into account the format of the meeting, its aim, its audience and its subject. This process of balancing had yielded a particular way of framing the intervention, the actors and the responsibilities which rendered certain readings more and others less plausible.

The press conference had to convey the Dutch mission as a carefully controlled undertaking. The organizers were acutely aware of this task and what was needed to coax the Dutch audience to understand the mission in this light. As the head of the organizing team of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put it years later in an interview (28 Nov. 2014):

We [policy makers] follow a sort of *maakbaarheidsideaal*, an ideal that people and societies could be molded into a desired shape. The mission in Uruzgan is supposed to yield a beautiful doll that you want to put on display, but you do not show the playground with a few nasty children that are trying to tear the doll apart.

In order to prevent the doll from being torn apart, the organizers briefed Naqeeb and Ajmal and nervously asked them to skillfully negotiate questions from journalists or parliamentarians regarding the independence of the report. Any appearance of bias or influencing by the Dutch embassy had to be avoided.

The proof of the pudding was now in the eating. The meticulous preparation could not guarantee a felicitous reception by the audience of the presentation. It was, however, not a challenge to our narrative, but a fatigue with the mission that affected its afterlife. To start with, only a fraction of the registered journalists showed up. Prior to the press conference, we learned that two big Dutch political issues had come to a head overnight. The first was a breakthrough in the government coalition formation that had been stuck for a while. Secondly, a high profile trial against the infamous populist, anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders had taken a tumultuous turn. With most journalists called away to report on the other, apparently more newsworthy incidents, the story of Dutch success was not going to travel very far.

From behind a long skirted table with water jugs, microphones and a projector, Naqeeb addressed the small crowd. He loosely referred to a PowerPoint of twenty slides in the background. The first slide made three points: that the mission had contributed to security and development

MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE

in Uruzgan; that the Dutch efforts had become considered a model of successful civil/military intervention; and that the future of the province would depend on the continuity of the efforts of the successors of the Dutch. He continued with slides about socio-economic improvements and achievements in the province. Naqeeb showed tables of healthcare and education and mentioned examples of agro-economic and gender equality achievements. Then followed the more controversial topics of government and security: in four years' time, government and security forces in Uruzgan had grown a bit stronger, but there was still much left to be desired. Naqeeb ended with recommendations that the Australians take over the command in the province. He emphasized the achievements of the Dutch once more and substantiated them with maps of Dutch projects and developments across the province.

After the conference there was only a short discussion. One journalist asked Naqeeb whether the Dutch government had supervised the writing of the text. Naqeeb said that that wasn't the case, in accordance with the briefing instructions he had been given before the meeting. It was a strange situation: everyone involved (i.e. the journalists, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our evaluation organization) suspected or knew that the text of the report had been changed and presented a politically less problematic picture than a previous version and they all seemed to accept this. The head of the organizing team said to me in an interview years later (28 Nov. 2014) that the press conference had indeed been a ritual dance and that none of the journalists had cared enough about a different version of the story to change or challenge the narrative.

The story of the Dutch in Uruzgan didn't reach many people. The press conference did not make it on TV and most written media didn't report the evaluation results of the Afghan research organization beyond copy-pasting the press statement onto their websites. The head organizer was disappointed: "when you dress a doll so beautifully you want people to see it! And we really had something to show for!" (28 Nov. 2014) But there was nothing to be done against the Uruzgan fatigue among politicians and journalists. Domestic politics and politicians had become more urgent. The former Head of Development with the Dutch embassy who was also present at the press conference, shrugged. He said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had done its best and that this is how things go sometimes. With this he seemed to suggest that the press conference was more important for passing the accountability test than for reaching a big audience.

And so, success and failure were framed within an accountability logic: the Dutch had carefully and attentively endeavored to bring about change and had anticipated where change was unlikely. The beautiful doll was there to prove that success and failure were both carefully planned and anticipated. However, what was intended to be a cogent meeting of accountability ended up fizzling out in a bleak gathering of disinterest, manifesting not the opposite of success — a challenge of

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Dutch command of the situation in Uruzgan — but indifference with the Dutch efforts altogether. As such, the fact that the meeting could stage the Dutch intervention as a success had as much to do with a carefully crafted narrative as it had to do with a lack of people and incentive to challenge this narrative. Without the lens of the meeting we might have relied on the conceptual framing of success that speaks from the press statement, which was the condensed version of the PowerPoint presentation. The lens of the meeting brings out a practical dimension. The meeting was sufficient as an accountability tool, but unsuccessful at making a carefully spun narrative travel much beyond its moment and location.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENT AND EXPLORATION

The organizers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were sad that only few people had learned of the successes of the mission through the press conference but relieved that the narrative of the Dutch mission in Uruzgan had not been challenged politically or publicly. For the rest of the meetings in the program they had other ambitions. The next meeting was with the director of an organization that meant to improve the situation of Afghan children and was not at all prepared, scripted or public.

The organization was involved in Uruzgan and its director wanted to discuss the practicalities of working in the province. At a small table in an empty office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, coffee from the machine, he brought up a recent issue: the destruction of a school in Uruzgan funded by the parents of a Dutch soldier who had died in Uruzgan. As a way to commemorate their son, the parents had raised money for the construction of a school in his memory and donated it to the Afghan Ministry of Education on the condition that it would be used to build a girls' school even though no girls' schools were needed. Shortly thereafter, the school was blasted in an attack and the building was destroyed. The director wanted to know why this had happened and how to negotiate sensitivities better in the future after the school would have been rebuilt.

The director said he was aware of the fact that the insurgency understood efforts towards educational developments as unwanted international presence and influence, and that for that reason the building of this school had been an invitation for trouble. Naqeeb and Ajmal didn't know the story of the school's blast, but Naqeeb argued that if it had indeed been the Taliban who destroyed the school, it would have been ordered by the Pakistani Secret Service since local Talibs would never destroy their own environment. The question remained as to how else an international organization could engage in such a contentious topic like educational development? Should one be upfront about one's involvement, the way Médecins sans Frontières committed to openness and

MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE

recognizability and therefore moved around in marked cars? Or should one be invisible and secretive about the origin of developmental money and efforts? This last strategy was more or less the one adopted by the Dutch government. The point of the Dutch development and security efforts was to build the governmental structure in Uruzgan. By remaining invisible as the one who invested the money while delegating the efforts in developmental and security projects to Afghan NGOs or governmental institutions, the latter would be credited with the success of the progress. And so, the Dutch argued, credibility and trust in Afghan structures would improve.

The question this meeting explored was about the relation between intervention style — open and collaborative or reticent and prescriptive — and the intervention's effect. Ajmal argued that a good approach to development would be to feel one's way through the intricacies of local circumstances. This approach would require the intervention to handle a few issues with care. For one, Uruzganis felt that the Dutch promised a lot but did not deliver. They would prefer knowing what and how things were being done in the province, and this in turn would benefit the Dutch reputation. Secondly, it wasn't surprising that the Dutch were trying to stay under the radar since the one who spends money runs the risk of becoming a player in a conflict. The Dutch weren't as well connected as the Afghan organizations or NGOs and therefore it was more difficult for them to participate openly in Uruzgan society. But lastly, Ajmal ended, even if the Dutch would strike the right balance with these issues, the blast could of course have been unrelated to a contention about who built or funded the school. A land or water conflict, or an issue concerning a teacher or student might very well have motivated the attack, rather than Western meddling in Afghanistan through education.

In contrast to the press conference, this meeting did not revolve around a pre-established sense of success or failure. This meeting was not about accounting, but about exploring, pondering and learning about the situation and actors of Uruzgan. The goods and the bads of the intervention in Uruzgan took shape in different ways within the exploration of the specific issue of how to do development work in the context of insurgency. The exploratory style of the meeting was mirrored in Ajmal's recommendations for a good approach to operations in the field: a good approach would feel its way through the intricacies of local circumstances. The inquisitive openness of the meeting required other things to be present and absent than in the press conference. Whereas in the press conference the audience was necessary as witness and reporter, this meeting needed an interlocutor, in fact turned presenter and audience into conversation partners who carefully listened and spoke. The meeting was small for a reason. Too many people present would have jeopardized the free exchange of thoughts for practical reasons as too many questions and personalities might have steered away from the topic of conversation. The meeting did not end with a conclusion. It had collected a few scenarios and the director would take these back to his office.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

THE LOBBY AND PERSUASION

After lunch Naqeeb, Ajmal and I met with the Director General in her office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The DG only had twenty minutes to talk to us and wanted to know if we had any recommendations for her for future action on the basis of the evaluation report. We told her that now that our research organization had made an effort to give an impression of the situation in Uruzgan, we needed her to communicate this to her constituencies and to make sure that internal, domestic politics wouldn't get in the way of sustained developmental interest and involvement in Uruzgan. Our request came up when we talked about a specific program that was being developed on informal justice. The goal of this program was to formalize the justice system of Uruzgan but not through the transformation of local judges into versions of their Western colleagues, because that seemed impossible. Instead, the justice system would initially build on local councils and judges who ruled on the basis of the sharia out of which a formal system would be developed later on. Our request to the DG was to explain this to parliament.

The DG smiled and sighed. This encouraged us to frame our request a bit more in moral terms. This time we emphasized that bringing about change in Afghanistan was a collaborative effort: we had gone through a lot of trouble — even putting ourselves at risk — to find out what the situation was in Afghanistan; now it was up to her to risk something, too. She told us that she understood why we proposed to pursue the formalization of the justice system like this. However good she found our suggestions though, this topic put her in a difficult position. We were basically asking her to try to persuade parliament to let go of the idea that only the implementation of a Western style formalized justice system would be a mark of improvement. If this in itself wasn't already a stretch, to ask parliament to support an informal justice program that would work with sharia judges was impossible in the current political climate. Lobbying for a collaboration with sharia judges would require political courage and cleverness as it would antagonize aforementioned anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders cum suis who had a strong foothold in parliament and public debate at that time. No one would risk his or her political career over support for this right now. She sighed again. Twenty minutes later we left the office realizing that we had in fact reached an agreement on what the problem was, but that sharia law was not accepted as a solution. We did not expect much to follow from this meeting.

This lobby meeting was neither about accounting nor about learning. Instead, it brought two different logics together — that of politics and development operation. Developmental success and failure were defined in two ways. First, according to the temporalities and needs of the field it made no sense to start training local judges to perform as their Dutch colleagues because there

MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE

is no infrastructure in place locally that enables administering justice the way this happens in The Netherlands. It would work much better to transform slowly towards a formal justice system while building on the local, so-called informal justice system. The second concern defined success and failure according to the temporalities and needs of politics: to collaborate with judges who rule on the basis of the sharia is a political choice risking the connection to constituencies, election outcomes, and support for government in parliament. What was success for one — collaborating with sharia judges to formalize the legal system — was failure for the other: for instance, collaborating with sharia judges would antagonize Geert Wilders. Both had to compromise if the goal was to have an operational justice system in Uruzgan.

The lobby was an attempt to persuade the DG of the value of our suggested course of action. In some sense we failed. Walking out of the meeting it did not seem likely that parliamentary support for the informal justice project would be asked for. The political climate was such that the DG did not have much room for maneuver. Our meeting, however, was a lot more than a reasoned and discursive exchange. Persuasion proceeded through silences, sighs and smiles (cf Beekers, 2015). The DG transformed into our opponent while being a partner in understanding at the same time. We invoked a moral argument by questioning the legitimacy of an opposition leader governing domestic politics, of MPs choosing electoral success over a clear way forward in Afghanistan. We tried to convince the DG that good development was a responsibility of politics towards development operations and we projected this relation between spheres of influence onto our personal encounter in the DG's office. The DG surely had dealt with a situation like this before. Her sigh seemed to acknowledge our moral authority. Her smiles, however, were cordial but firm shields against our persuasive attempts, showing good character while refusing to compromise.

THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE PRACTICAL

So far we have seen how success and failure were done conceptually and practically. In the press conference, success and failure were framed as concepts within a logic of accountability. Success meant that the Dutch had been well prepared, had anticipated the mission carefully and had overall been in control. This led to a few positive changes in health, in education, in security. The changes were not enormous, and, moreover, they only applied to a small part of the province. This didn't matter. The main message of the conference was that the Dutch had been in control. Failure, in this context, was not the opposite of being in control. It was, instead, also encapsulated in the logic of accountability and referred to certain developments that had indeed failed to happen, but for which

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

the Dutch could not be blamed. Failure, then, was framed as either an inherent problem of the development process or as the shortcomings of the Afghans who were not ready for change. The analytical lens of the meeting allows us to appreciate that then and there the success of the Dutch mission depended on the success of the meeting. The message that success was an effect of Dutch control and anticipation depended itself on the level of control and anticipation of the meeting as an event. However, while the meeting was a success in one way — as the journalists did not put the presenters to the test and the narrative was allowed to pass — the message of Dutch success in Uruzgan was not widely broadcasted. In the tumultuous times of Dutch domestic politics, the Dutch mission didn't matter, politically and socially. As the journalists put in hardly any work to make the narrative travel, what remained was indifference.

The meeting about ongoing development framed success and failure very differently. Here there were no pre-established understandings of success and failure, no careful preparations to get a narrative across. Instead, the attendants explored a situation through several scenarios that implied different versions of success and failure. The meeting's style of exploration was replicated in Ajmal's comment that a successful approach to development would always feel its ways through the intricacies of the local circumstances. Success in development depended on a careful consideration of the field, both in Uruzgan and in The Hague in the small office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The lobby meeting framed success and failure differently yet again. Here the logic of development operations ran counter to the logics of politics. While success in operational terms meant collaboration with sharia judges, this would mean upheaval and crisis in the political realm. The task of the meeting was to get out of this opposition and find a solution that would satisfy both parties. This was attempted through persuasion. Participating in the meeting was an ambiguous affair. There was text and subtext, both intended to frame ideas as well as move opponents. The meeting displayed a split between a personal and a political mode of relating.

The three meetings show that conceptual framings and their practical doing are profoundly intertwined. Success and failure within an accountability logic that took shape within the press conference would not have emerged in the same way within the private setting of the meeting about ongoing development. And the setting of the lobby would not fit with the concerns of the press conference. The conceptual framing of the success and failure of Dutch efforts in Uruzgan is not an abstract achievement but grounded in the particularities of the meeting place, setting and configuration of participants. Even more, the narrative of success and failure are replicated in the diverse textures of the meetings. Accountability's control permeates both the way success is framed in the press conference and the way the meeting is done. Ongoing development's exploration informs the way the meeting with the NGO for children proceeds as well as Ajmal's recommendations for suc-

cess to its director. And the lobby's tactics of persuasion aimed at compromise, both in the meeting between individuals and as a model for developmental success in the realm of politics. The meeting's form and the meeting's objective, the practical and the conceptual, are recursively constituted, oriented towards success. Success "seen twice" (Riles, 2000) has implications for our understandings of accountability, ongoing development and lobbies, as now the question is not just whether international development is successful, but whether the meetings organized around this issue were successful (cf. Jensen and Winthereik, 2013).

Mosse's understanding of the relation between the practical and the conceptual is different. He argues that success depends on the stabilization of a particular narrative, which happens through the attachment of interests to it. As soon as the attachments disappear, the interpretation disappears and the project fails, even if it has had many successful effects according to others. To keep projects afloat one has to invest in them conceptually rather than practically, Mosse argues. While I agree that without support for a development model this model loses political reality, I argue here that this is not a conceptual affair only, and that the conceptual does not just pertain to the policy realm. And as support is not just a conceptual affair, but also a practical one, meetings about success open up to (the possibility of) new realities, new practices and new support. These three meetings have amended Mosse's inattention to the practical dimension of conceptual work by showing that the one only happens by means of the other and, in fact, that the conceptual and the practical constitute one another. Donovan's (2014) encouragement to infuse the theory of development with a sense for relationality and analytical symmetry is helpful here. Just like Mosse, he speaks of translation and mediation. He emphasizes that all things – no thing can be analytically privileged or excluded – become real in their practical connections, transforming the meaning and goals of the entities that are connected. Translation is an engagement of multiple actors; it consists of small alterations and is not pre-ordained by power struggles. Through Donovan's emphasis on symmetry and his attention to the engagement of multiple actors we can think of the meetings as meetings quite literally, bringing together not only people, but also ways of presenting, ways of understanding, as well as technologies such as PowerPoint, small rooms, protocols, habits and timing. It is in these meetings that conceptual narratives are done in practice.

Understanding the conceptual and the practical as happening in a relation of mutual constitution rather than as separate domains changes our understanding of evaluation judgments. Different concerns such as accountability, learning and lobbying, come into being in specific meetings. Since the specific forms that success and failure can take are as much practical as they are about development practice, they cannot be considered as conceptual or about policy only.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What is more, our evaluations of development efforts should include considerations of the practical circumstances within which these evaluations take shape.

PS: THE ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION AND MEETINGS' CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

The three meetings analyzed so far succeeded as meetings. I will end with a discussion of a last meeting where this is less clearly the case. This addendum will allow me to think about conditions for meeting more generally.

As part of the program of Ajmal and Naqeeb's visit to the Netherlands, we went to a round table session of a Dutch think-tank concerned with issues of international and national security and defense. The occasion was a visit by the governor of the Eastern Afghan province of Khost who was invited to speak about the international presence in his province. There were about twenty people, mostly Dutch, seated around the big table in the front room of the majestic house in the center of The Hague. These people were diplomats, bureaucrats, employees of international or non-governmental organizations, academics in the field of international relations and strategists. After a speech by the governor in which he laid out the developments in his province, all those present were welcome to participate in a discussion about the negotiations with the Taliban, the undiminished corruption and governmental mismanagement despite international capacity building efforts, the Afghan National Army that was increasing in force and numbers but was still too reliant on the international forces, and about the police training mission that the Dutch government was planning in the northern Afghan government of Kunduz.

It was clear quite quickly that the governor and participants were talking past one another. The Dutch guests were interested to hear the governor's analysis of the current problems and his thoughts on future action. What mattered to a meeting like this was the identification of a problem and the urgent discussion of a solution. The questions and answers were framed in the lingo of international affairs, using terms such as state building, insurgency and quick fixes. The governor was expected to be well versed in this lingo, framing problems and solutions using the same language as the other guests who were present. However, he wasn't. Instead, he seemed to be drifting off in presentational quicksand. He would say that the Afghan government was struggling in Khost, something that everyone in the room understood, but, without pause, he would move into long elaborations about the good intentions of the Afghan government, the successful collaboration with the international intervention and their joint achievements over the past years and years to come.

MEETING WITH SUCCESS AND FAILURE

By the standards of most people present, the governor's statements were offbeat and nondescript. Rather than making a reality present by keeping to the rhythm and the specificity of the genre, he skimmed over pasts and futures, intentions and ONGOINGS, generalities and specificities that as a presentation or narrative made little sense to his audience. Most people zoned out, connecting to other time-spaces by checking their phones or staring outside through the big windows of the room. Not one of the participants engaged the governor in a discussion on what he meant.

Whereas the other guests present were used to a formal meeting procedure where questions and answers were tuned to one another and where each participant knew how much time questions, answers and presentations could take, the governor did not follow this format. His presence had a different temporal frame. He spoke much longer than any other participant. In addition, he did not do what all the other guests did: make present in his answers a clear linear chronology of cause, problem and solution in the past, present and future. The connections between his statements were unclear to his audience and what was made present was a blur of pasts and futures, intentions and proceedings.

The governor of Khost was out of place because he was not in sync, not in tune with his environment and therefore not capable of presenting Afghanistan in The Netherlands. Thinking about how to translate and transpose Western techniques to other parts of the world has been a long-standing interest in STS (de Laet and Mol, 2000; Redfield, 2012; Von Schnitzler, 2013). The issue here is not the exact inverse of how to get Afghanistan and its stories told in The Netherlands, but the question of how to present a story in the first place. The governor of Khost's failure to present Afghanistan in The Netherlands makes clear that development success and failure can only become present when the elements of the meeting, its people, protocols, languages, material infrastructures and temporalities successfully come together. In this round table discussion there was no story of success and failure. There was confusion and disengagement and because of this, there was, in some sense, no meeting. It is important to say that this meeting's failure is not an Afghan failure. Any scientist, evaluator, or politician has to meet the requirements for translation in order for data or policy to become present.

The difficulties of meeting with the governor made clear how easy it was to meet Naqeeb and Ajmal in the Netherlands. The organizers described Naqeeb and Ajmal as great presenters: charming, personable, knowledgeable and pragmatic. Moreover, it was so good to "have the presentations done by actual Afghans". Both had spent lots of time in Europe or had grown up there. They were familiar with styles of connecting to the different audiences present during these three days. They saw eye to eye with these varied people, paced their answers, and chose their words, tropes and images in accordance with expectations. They knew of the Dutch concern with women's rights, de-

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

mocracy or education and found convincing ways to discuss them in the different meetings during these days. They also easily switched to conversing with the governor of Khost or any other tribal elder. We can think of them as diplomats and this was enhanced by the ambivalence of their form as well. They looked fashionable in their Western clothes but their accents were distinctively Afghan. Like real diplomats, their concern was not with truth as a universal good, but with connection. As Stengers puts it, speaking about diplomats: “What is true is what succeeds in producing a communication between diverging parties, without anything in common being discovered or advanced” (2005: 193-194).

Even if communication failed between the governor of Khost and his audience, something else had in fact transpired. When I asked Naqeeb what his assessment was of the roundtable discussion organized in honor of the governor of Khost, he did not share my frustration about the miscommunication between the international affairs people and the governor. Of course, the governor on the one hand, and the audience on the other, practically came from different planets and weren't hearing each other. But to him this wasn't the point of the meeting. Presentations like this were political games. Playing along would not yield the truth, but attention for Afghanistan. The difference between Naqeeb's and my reading points to an interesting difference both in the temporalities of meetings and of the international intervention's success. Naqeeb would never assume that Afghanistan's success was going to depend on one meeting. Encounters take time, as do their effects. I, on the other hand, wanted instant encounter and instant connection – meet and succeed.