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Work in crisis: managing fantasies about distant strangers, managing aid workers

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an insight into the world of Polish development workers operating in South Sudan. It shows that the conceptualisations of aid work in terms of a ‘mission’, a unique job with a special, ethical goal, a difficult, risky operation requiring specific skills are not incidental. Instead, the point is made, that such ways of thinking about foreign aid and distant locations are strongly institutionalised sets of values and behavioural patterns, here defined as ‘work in crisis’. This specific notion is shaped by aid organisations who actively promote this rhetoric firstly through producing ‘truth’ about the aid work and project locations, and secondly through governing lived realities of the aid workers. The ‘work in crisis’ rhetoric helps to draw people into a development movement as devoted and allegiant followers. It also enables the management of these employees who are the most crucial for the industry – project coordinators – but who are separated from the organisational headquarters and NGO management by thousands of miles. Finally, it assists in the promotion of foreign aid among wider audiences in donor societies.

Le travail en situation de crise: gérer les fantasmes sur les étrangers lointains, gérer les travailleurs humanitaires

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article apporte une vision sur le monde de travailleurs humanitaires polonais qui interviennent au Soudan du Sud. Il démontre que les conceptualisations du travail humanitaire en matière de « mission », de travail unique en son genre avec un but spécial et éthique, une opération à risques, difficile, qui exige des compétences spécifiques, ne sont pas fortuites. Plutôt, l’argument présenté est que de telles manières de penser à propos de l’aide à l’étranger et dans des régions lointaines constituent un ensemble de valeurs de modes de pensées et de schémas comportementaux, définis ici en tant que « travail en situation de crise ». Cette notion particulière est déterminée par les organisations humanitaires qui promeuvent activement cette rhétorique, premièrement, en présentant « la vérité » au sujet du travail humanitaire et des emplacements du projet et deuxièmement en gouvernant les réalités vécues des travailleurs humanitaires. La rhétorique du « travail en situation de crise » aide à attirer les gens dans un mouvement de développement en tant qu’adeptes dévoués et loyaux. Elle permet aussi la gestion des employés qui sont essentiels

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à cette industrie – les coordinateurs de projet – mais qui sont aussi séparés des Quartiers Généraux et de la direction des ONG par des milliers de kilomètres. Enfin, elle aide à la promotion d'aide étrangère au sein d'un large public dans des sociétés donatrices.

El trabajo en crisis: la gestión de fantasías sobre extraños distantes y trabajadores humanitarios

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una visión del mundo de los trabajadores humanitarios polacos que operan en el sur de Sudán. Muestra que las conceptualizaciones del trabajo humanitario en términos de 'misión', un trabajo único con un objetivo ético especial, una operación difícil y arriesgada que requiere habilidades específicas, no son incidentales. En cambio, se señala que tales formas de pensar sobre la ayuda externa y los lugares lejanos son conjuntos fuertemente institucionalizados de valores y patrones de comportamiento, definidos aquí como el 'trabajo en crisis'. Esta noción concreta está conformada por organizaciones de ayuda que promueven activamente esta retórica en primer lugar a través de la producción de 'la verdad' sobre el trabajo de ayuda y la ubicación de proyectos, y en segundo lugar a través del manejo de la realidad vivida de los trabajadores humanitarios. La retórica del 'trabajo en crisis' ayuda a atraer a personas a un movimiento de desarrollo como seguidores devotos y leales. También permite la gestión de estos empleados que son los más importantes para la industria — los coordinadores de proyectos — pero que están separados de la sede de la organización y la gestión de las ONG por miles de kilómetros. Por último, contribuye a la promoción de la ayuda exterior entre audiencias más amplias en sociedades donantes.

Introduction

'Do you hitch-hike?' was one of the questions Zofia remembered the most from her job interview for the position of project coordinator at the Southern Sudanese 'mission'¹ of Save the World (STW)² – one of the largest Polish humanitarian NGOs. In the interview process each inquiry counts, so she knew the question was loaded. Yet, she sensed that in spite of her quite impressive work record with migrants in Poland, and good managerial experience it might be her travel habits rather than career trajectory that would prove decisive in competing for this job:

'Of course I do not!' she later told me. 'What does it have to do with the job? As a matter of fact, my previous job was so exhausting, and in such a dull place, that when I was on holiday I actually liked to have a nice time and indulge in some sort of luxury. No, I do not hitch-hike, so what? If I want I can do my nails every day, that is none of their business, and has nothing to do with my work. I asked them if instead they would like to hear what I did in my previous job, but what they only wanted to know if I liked to travel on trucks'.

Such hiring procedures are intended to test preparedness for 'mission life'. Careful hiring practices ensure that only qualified candidates are accepted. But how qualifications for working in the foreign aid industry, for implementing projects in distant locations (especially in Africa) are defined by the national NGOs such as STW? Even though Zofia was offered the position of water and sanitation project officer in South Sudan, she had no experience or knowledge of the field. If she was applying for a similar job in Poland, or anywhere in Europe, some background in technological engineering would be required. However, under the label

of development, a completely different set of skills was expected from the candidates. As Katarzyna, another Polish expatriate working with STW explained, neither was education the most important factor when being offered employment by these NGOs:

I think, for this job, it is less important what educational background you have. I studied agriculture, and now I am doing food security. But my studies did not prepare me for this environment at all. You just have to figure it out all by yourself, and learn it yourself. So what is actually more important is if you can adapt to this different setting, to different people who are living here. If you can communicate well, if you can live in this place.

This description suggests that development is perceived as a job in which qualifications are secondary to the individual's character and personality. Effectively, in the mid-2000s Polish development organisations were populated by young individuals in their 20s often without a degree or straight out of universities, who travelled to the assigned locations with ambitions of 'doing development' and 'working as project coordinators'. In reality, these employees actually had little expertise in the field for which they were hired. There were four expatriates working for STW in South Sudan during my fieldwork: Marcel, was the head of the mission. He possessed a degree in law; Zofia was the water and sanitation project coordinator. She graduated with a degree in African Studies; I, an anthropologist, became a financial officer. We had little experience which prepared us for our roles in the organisation. Katarzyna was the only member of the team who had an MA in a discipline relevant to her work as the coordinator of the agriculture project. However, she lacked any practical knowledge. Nevertheless, even with our relative lack of experience in the field we had no problem being recruited.

Studies of humanitarianism have already pointed out a specific trait in the foreign aid industry, showing it to be organised as an international operation of discovery and conquest, an out-of-the-ordinary experience (Fechter & Hindman, 2012; Mosse, 2011). Frequently, aid work is seen as a 'mission': a unique job with the ethical goal, a risky operation. Aid workers often describe their work placements as a 'mission', 'field', or 'post'. These metaphors are echoing missionary and military roots of humanitarian and development work (Roth, 2011, p. 4). The fact that aid industry has this specific ancestry might to some extent explain why aid workers are often perceived as heroes or missionaries. However, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that specific formation of the development persona, and the ways mission life is structured is not simply historically conditioned, nor it is a matter of individual lifestyle-choices of aid workers. Instead, these identities are shaped by aid organisations who actively promote this rhetoric firstly through producing 'truth' about the aid work and project locations, and secondly through governing lived realities of the aid workers.

In the first section of this article I will discuss how these processes take place, what forms do they take. But, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that this specific formation of the development persona, and the ways mission life is structured is not simply historically conditioned, nor it is a matter of individual lifestyle-choices of aid workers. Instead, these identities are shaped by aid organisations who actively promote this rhetoric firstly through producing 'truth' about the aid work and project locations, and secondly through governing lived realities of the aid workers. In the first section of this article I will discuss how these processes take place, what forms do they take. In a second part of the article, I will discuss the potential reasons and outcomes of these governmentality techniques. They are at least threefold. Firstly, they simply enable the management of these employers who are the most crucial for the industry – project coordinators – but who are separated from the organisational headquarters and NGO management by thousands of miles. Secondly, the creation

of specific professional identity helps in drawing people into a development movement as devoted and allegiant followers. The goal is to legitimise, reproduce and sustain the industry and the development narrative. Finally, such rhetoric enables to promote foreign aid among wider audiences in donor societies. It contributes to the wider development discourse, by defining foreign aid as one of the key solutions to global poverty, an urgent and moral (rather than political or economic) practice.

Of course, the aid industry is not a homogenous entity and each sector, each organisation defines these matters in a slightly different manner. The ways in which professional identity of aid workers is defined and enforced through management techniques vary between organisations. It is a dynamic process which changes in time and is never fixed. But at the same time, the specific nature of the industry at large which is characterised by separation of field offices and headquarters by hundreds of miles, and simultaneous dependency of these units on each other, a reality of connection and fragmentation, where visible elements depend on hidden realities, fosters the creation and institutionalisation of the specific professional identity in most organisations, regardless whether they are small NGOs or big multinational institutions. This paper, however, does not have an ambition to cover all these instances, but instead open up a discussion about these issues by unpacking a case of the STW – a relatively small Polish NGO, operating both in the field of humanitarian and development aid. To secure my access to this organisation, I negotiated the position of an unpaid volunteer at its mission site in South Sudan. My access to the organisation was made easier thanks to my previous engagement with the NGO: as an undergraduate student, I worked for the organisation in Kosovo. My fieldwork with the organisation took place between October 2007 and June 2008. The first month of this period I spent working in the Warsaw headquarters of the NGO. Following this, I moved to South Sudan. Together with other expatriates, Zofia, Katarzyna and Marcel, I lived in the organisational compound and worked in the office. Apart from dealing with my administrative responsibilities, I followed my colleagues in their daily routines. This research was further enhanced by some 20 interviews and additional formal and informal conversations that I conducted with other Polish aid workers representing various aid organisations.

Work in crisis

In the last years, the literature on the 'Aidland' has grown considerably (Fechter & Hindman, 2012; Mosse, 2011). This specific ethnography mostly depicts and interprets the institutional culture of aid industry at large and the 'expert knowledges' that inculcate and sustain it. 'It probes and ponders the *representations collectives* and *classifications sociales* by which Aidmen and Aidwomen say they order and understand their world and work, whether these are virtual or real' (Apthorpe, 2011, p. 199). A special place in these studies holds a debate about professional identity of the aid workers. Are they Angels of Mercy of Development Diplomats (Tvedt, 1998)? Are they Mercenaries, Missionaries or Misfits? (Stirrat, 2008) Are they altruistic or selfish (de Jong, 2011; Vaux, 2001)? Are they motivated by humanitarian or professional sensibility (Fechter, 2012; Malkki, 2015)? While all of these studies present slightly different angles, they all have a unifying feature: they assume that aid work is a *special* type of work: It is a moral labour (Fechter, 2016), but it is also a risky enterprise strongly shaped by the issues of security and safety (Roth, 2011). This approach has some descriptive value: it presents the backstage of the development industry. It pays attention to the lives and

works of aid workers; gives them face and voice. Most importantly, this work reflects the internal debates of the industry.

The questions mentioned above are central to the conversations that aid workers have in the bars and offices across the Global South. But as Smirl (2015) suggested, the out-of-ordinary experiences of aid workers are not incidental. The life in the field, its difficulties and hardships but also excitements and adventures do not just *happen to* people, but instead constitute a form of professional rite of passage. Her research indicates that the experiences of the field cannot be simply naturalised and taken at the face value, but instead should be critically examined. Therefore, following her suggestion, in this paper my focus is not on answering a question whether aid workers are missionaries, super heroes, professionals or altruists, but instead on a question: *why does it matter?*

Some suggestions for answering that questions can be found in the Redfield's work on *Medecins Sans Frontieres – MSF* (Redfield, 2013). Examining the ways in which MSF define its operations and spaces of activisms, Redfield describes the ways in which humanitarians employ a concept of 'Life in Crisis' in order to validate their action. Through focusing on extraordinary suffering (which is by definition exception, but in the world according to MSF becomes a rule) organisation creates the sense of urgency, and in that way justifies its foreign presence. But what I want to add to the Redfield's analysis is a suggestion, that if aid workers are coming to save 'lives in crisis', consequently, those who respond to the emergency – Aidmen and Aidwomen – 'work in crisis'.

The popular version of the 'work in crisis', the one which is at play in the industry suggests that development and humanitarian endeavours are extraordinary experiences, exactly because of the very harsh, unpredictable and often risky working conditions. It is those special circumstances – the crisis – that make this job so different from any other profession. But as Mbembe and Roitman (1995) suggest, such a linear understanding of crisis, based on cause and effect logic cannot be sustained. Instead they suggest to

treat the crisis as, above all, lived experience (...). This suggests that it is in everyday life that the crisis as a limitless experience and a field of the dramatization of particular forms of subjectivity is authored, receives its translations, is institutionalized, loses its exceptional character and in the end, as a 'normal,' ordinary and banal phenomenon, becomes an imperative of consciousness. (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 325)

Few scholars have already examined such issues as the dramatisation and normalisation of the risk and danger within the industry (Roth, 2011, 2015; Smirl, 2015). In this paper, I want to focus on the ways in which these issues are institutionalised. While I have no doubt that the aid delivery occasionally can be a risky endeavour, in this paper I want to demonstrate how the 'truth' about health and safety at the mission sites is often produced by the NGOs themselves. In this context, security procedures, plans and policies are not simply a reaction to the existing threats. Together with very specific behaviours and attitudes which are actively, though informally, promoted in organisations, they constitute a part of a larger discourse on the aid industry. They are structuring organisational life, justifying the NGOs right to exercise power over their employees.

Out of our bodies, out of our minds

The process of forming the notions about aid work as special task, a 'work in crisis', starts already at the recruitment stage. As the opening vignette of this article suggests, it begins

as a conversation in the job interview, and gradually becomes highly organised practice, integral to the way through which development organisations operate. In STW the hiring process includes health assessment by a physician and psychologist. This might not seem as a very unusual practice. In Poland, each employee, regardless of the industry, has to undergo a medical evaluation confirming their ability to carry out responsibilities required in the job. This is done routinely by doctors specialising in occupational medicine. However, STW have additionally requested that their future employees see a doctor specialising in tropical diseases. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I also was required to visit this doctor. Shortly before the visit, I emailed the Desk Officer with whom I negotiated my access to the Sudanese mission, to ask if there was any organisational policy regarding malaria prophylaxis. The response was brief and dismissive. The Desk Officer suggested that no one in the field took it, and it was my own decision to take it or not. This seemed contradictory: if this health issue was my private matter, why were employees required to see a doctor specialising in tropical medicine before taking up a job?

Soon equipped with all necessary medical permits I went to the organisational headquarters. There, I was about to meet my future boss, the Head of the Southern Sudanese Mission. Marcel, had just come to Poland for recovery and recreation (R&R). His arrival to the office brought a serious commotion. People greeted him with enthusiasm and respect. Colleagues patted him on the shoulders, and with a sense of admiration they asked how he was. Marcel had malaria. This was pointed out to me by our Desk Officer, who stressed that in spite of the health issues Marcel still came to work and never took a day off. Soon, in a truly competitive manner both of them chatted about different health problems they experienced while working across the world.

As I watched this spectacle, I thought back to the statement made by the same Desk Officer, that health issues were a private matter. However, my experiences and observations from that day made it clear that they in fact were not. The requirement to see a hand-picked tropical disease specialist, undergo review by a psychologist, were part of the institutionalised way of building the professional identity of development workers. On the one hand, they were suggesting special, extraordinary working condition in the aid industry, requiring from the workers some above average abilities. On the other, they were making a virtue out of suffering and commitment, prizing those who did not show any sign of weakness.

The exposure to 'African environment' was perceived as dangerous not only for the development worker's health, but also mental wellbeing. In one of our conversations, Zofia described to me a discussion that she witnessed in the same Warsaw office, just before her departure to Sudan. Two higher ranked managers were casually discussing organisational issues of the foreign missions they were responsible for. Sitting at their desks, they were talking across the room full of other staff members when one asked about the wellbeing of the STW worker stationed abroad: 'So how is she doing at the mission?' – 'Well you know, it gets into her, she is going a little crazy, but who wouldn't after all that time in Sudan!' They laughed, while Zofia listened in disbelief that people can treat mental wellbeing in such a detached way.

This surely was not an exceptional case. Gossip about the drinking problems of those aid workers who could not bear 'the gravity' of the place was often circulating among expatriates in South Sudan. It was also one of the first topics that the Head of the Mission raised with me, upon my arrival:

It is intense, you have to watch yourself, because you might easily lose it. I guess when you start drinking from the morning this should be a red flag for you, hinting that you should leave. Do you smoke?

'No', I answered.

'Do you drink?'

'No ...'

'You will start in Sudan', he said, laughing.

This perception of the development mission as particularly challenging resulted in institutionalised precautions. As already noted, candidates had to undergo psychological tests, aimed at determining whether a person was capable of dealing with the hardships of the job. STW was not the only one requiring such psychological assessments. For instance, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a similar way, was screening the candidates for the volunteering programme.

The psychological impact of dealing with extreme poverty, violence and of inevitable frictions between aid workers' aspirations and their frustrations with inability to address most of the issues, is a common theme in the studies of Aidland (Comoretto, Crichton, & Albery, 2015; Roth, 2015). Most of the studies conclude that aid workers need stronger support from their organisations in dealing with trauma and stress. These studies assume that even though psychological difficulties are part and parcel of the work in the aid industry they are an *unwanted* side-effect (Roth, 2011). But the work of Wigley (2002), counters this perception. Looking from the perspective of organisational studies Wigley demonstrates how characteristics of aid organisations can be more detrimental to their employees' well-being than the crisis in which they work. Also Smirl (2015), using anthropological approach shows that stress and trauma are actually used as an important part in the professional 'rite of passage' of the aid workers. My own material not only confirms these findings, but also takes this hypothesis a step further.

As we can see in the stories described above, the issues of well-being are noted by the management, but not as a 'problem' which requires addressing. They are not only normalised, but in fact they become a sign of good performance, 'a job well done'. I started this article with a vignette in which I discuss the qualities that aid workers perceive as essential for their job. Most of them prioritise special, 'soft' skills over the actual expertise related to the projects. This view is also replicated by researchers. For instance Slim, argues that the repertoire of the most crucial skills in the industry includes

informed political analysis, negotiation skills, conflict analysis management and resolution, propaganda monitoring and humanitarian information broadcasting, broader understanding of vulnerability to include notions of political, ethnic, gender and class-based vulnerability; human rights monitoring and reporting, military liaison; and personal security and staff welfare

as well as moral skills (Slim, 1995, p. 110). All of these are pointing to the 'special', character of the job, assuming potential difficulties resulting from the dealings with political, ethnic or military conflicts – a 'work in crisis'. But they also, significantly, are missing such qualities as management skills, effectiveness and ability to work to deadlines. In fact, the inability to deliver promised results in a timely manner is one of the most typical reasons for frustration with the aid work (Mosse, 2004, 2005). It is such a prominent feature of the industry, that it became internalised as a norm (Rist, 2002). In such circumstances, it is very difficult to assess

if delays in the project delivery, or poor project outcomes are results of the bad management or external circumstances, or both. In such context the well-being of aid workers, are often becoming the only proof of the aid workers' dedication and commitment to the job. The information about psychological burn out, frustration and stress of the employee are signalling to the managers, that the aid worker is actually working, and working well.

Importantly, the lack of success in aid delivery is not only normalised, but usually blamed on the difficult environment – rather than the organisational constraints of the aid industry. Aid workers, who spent relatively little time in one region experience problems which are typical for all migrants – lack of understanding of the local political context and culture, lack of knowledge about organisational structures of the state and local administration, legal regulations, industry and business models, and lack of professional networks. This significantly complicates their work and effectiveness. Still, most of the work done on development see North American and European aid workers as people with power. But while indeed they are given positions of power, they are actually very weak: they have minimal understandings of how things really work on the ground, and no networks which they can use in their professional endeavours. They are given tasks for the experienced managers, but often have to work from the position of novice, and learn everything from scratch once they relocate. Even if they are experienced aid workers, for the local communities and authorities they are unknown individuals who only need to earn respect. There is no surprise that work in such conditions creates frustration and leads to tensions. However, the dominant discourse suggests that the source of the problems is not in the organisational arrangements of the industry which delegates its crucial tasks to the people who have no capacity to solve them. Instead, blame is often positioned on the local culture which is seen as an obstacle to the development (Baaz, 2005; Cook, 2007; Spies, 2016). What is emphasised is a crisis context of the welcoming state.

Such orientalisation of the locations in which projects are implemented is reflected not only in the ways in which aid workers describe their partners and societies which they entered, but also special procedures to which they are subjected by the sending organisations. One example is 'Recovery and Recreation' – R&R. This form of holiday is widely popular in the aid industry, with many organisations offering their fieldworkers a vacation time every few months. Again, this could be nothing unusual, as a need to annual leave is practiced in most professions around the world. However, the meaning that is given to a holiday in the aid industry as well as its structure, are yet another signal suggesting the special character of the job. In the STW even though R&R was considered a holiday, it was regulated by the employer. The NGO was insisting that R&R is used for home travel. The implication was, that part of the reason why this job is so draining is in the local environment, culture and living conditions. The only way to 'recover' from the difficulties of development work was to leave the country. That is why when Katarzyna wanted to travel to Kenya and indulge in a luxury holiday during her R&R, she had to carefully negotiate this issue. As such, the idea of R&R was suggesting it was not enough to simply stop working and leave the office. The development worker had to leave the 'African environment' which was perceived as dangerous and stressful.

But at STW the purpose of R&R was something more than to benefit the mental wellbeing of the aid worker. During their holiday expatriates were obliged to visit the Warsaw office and report on the work in the field. On these occasions the Desk Officer would typically suggest a lunch, usually in a popular though distant milk bar. The walk to the bistro and

dining together was an excellent occasion for him to question the expat about the work but also about those who remained at the mission site. Knowing that such situations would take place, before departures to Warsaw expatriates would often discuss how to proceed with questions, what information should be revealed and how it should be provided. Since their work was highly dependent on the Desk Officer based in Warsaw, and vice versa – his evaluation depended on the results and performance of the African mission – the success of both sides depended on this information exchange (cf. Born, 1995). This tight dependency coupled with physical separation, resulted in a world of mutual distrust. In this world, the reproduction of the idea that aid workers are always working in some state of crisis, that African locations are dangerous, and requiring special precautionary procedures (such as an R&R, and obligatory visit in Warsaw headquarters) was in favour of the organisation: it allowed the management of the staff which was separated from the headquarters by hundreds of miles.

Purity

The institutionalisation of 'work in crisis' paradigm takes place not only through the governmentality of health and wellbeing issues, but also through the ways in which aid organisations aim to influence social life of their employees, in particular their love life and sexual conduct. This issue was a big topic in the STW compound, but the organisation was not an exception in that regard. While this topic receives little attention from the researchers, in 2014 the practitioners themselves opened a public debate about the issue through a publication in the Guardian (Oosterhoff & Wach, 2014). The perception of the development industry as a sort of a 'mission' requires workers to submit to rigid control of their personal lives. Through defining human relations in terms of security and danger aid organisations are able to impose additional measures on their employees. By stripping aid workers of their normal human agency (Smirl, 2015, p. 36) organisations not only govern the work of their employees, but also actively influence their lifestyles and worldviews. The inscription of 'work in crisis' imaginary into social relations, enables its expansion. It seizes not only professional domain, but also private. 'Work in crisis' is no more simply about work, a development project which has to be carried out, now it is about a development *mission*.

In the STW the promoted model was a single worker, restraining from any romantic and sexual engagements. The lack of relationships was not simply a matter of sacrifice in the name of the development cause, a personal choice of the aid worker. The appendix to the STW employment contract stipulated that 'one should not have any close contacts with the individuals of the opposite sex who are members of the local community or co-workers'. Significantly, this heteronormative clause was listed under 'Security Regulations'. While the STW leaders disapproved of all relationships in the field, they perceived relationships between expatriate staff and local people as particularly risky and unethical. Following infamous cases of aid workers using their privileged positions for sexual benefits with the people they were supposed to help (Csaky, 2008), the STW put in place regulations which aimed ostensibly to protect the 'local people'.

But the very same regulations were also envisioned as a way to protect development workers and organisation. When one of my colleagues got involved with a Kenyan man working in the area, she quickly received the following 'friendly' advice from her boss, 'Be careful with him, you know *these* guys'. When another woman at the compound became

involved with a Sudanese man, her supervisor disapproved, commenting that she should be glad that he did not kidnap her. His fears were informed by the stories of 'local culture' circulating among the expats, according to which Dinka men kidnapped women. At the same time, his ideas were also informed by other racist views, that black men are thought to be promiscuous predators. Such preconceived notions show that perceptions of human sexuality in the aid sector have not shifted greatly from those established during the colonial era. Like the 'natives' from the colonial times, the 'local men' of the development era represented obscenity and sexual tension between female sexuality, exotics and the pathology of the other (Fabian, 2000; Vaughan, 1991). Ultimately, sexual conduct was considered a health and safety issue, and as such it became a subject of organisational control.

As Stirrat (2008) observed, the development industry prefers individuals who are free from social constraints and social bonds. In STW, the NGO management made it clear that work should come first, and that personal relationships are an unnecessary distraction. Around the NGO, gossip circulated about the negative attitude of the STW President toward couples who wanted to work on the same mission, or people who fell in love while being posted abroad. So when she arrived to the mission site, her employees would hide their relationships from her, pretending that they were not involved with anyone. This specific situation was explained to me by Marcel, who at that time was going through a divorce. With a hint of bitterness, he implied that his status as a divorcee made him a much better employee from STW's perspective: he had no strings attached, could work 24 h, 7 days a week, he lived at the mission, and his bed was in a tent 10 m away from his office. He only had his work, and no private life.

Danger

Clearly issues related to physical and mental health, and personal conduct were important for the creation of the professional identity of aid workers through the notion of the 'work in crisis'. But the main foundation enabling the formation of this discourse was general perception of distant locations as dangerous. During my work in South Sudan danger was something we were constantly reminded of. The mission was located in an area which was not demilitarised, where the sight of the military was not exceptional, and UN 'blue helmets' had a permanent base. Still, the STW staff did not feel the permanent external threat. STW staff lived in a compound barely fenced with a wire net. Even though the organisation kept large sums of money in the office, the management did not rush to purchase safes. Expats often broke curfew rules and were spending long evenings in local bars.

Yet there was a constant *expectation* of risk and danger. The *potentiality* of danger was emphasised and made visible through various organisational arrangements. Every Friday, representatives of the aid organisations operating in the area attended the Bor Area Security Management Meetings at the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) compound. The meetings evolved around collecting quantitative data about incidents in the region, rather than discussing the actual mechanisms leading to the violent episodes. The outcomes were weekly security reports accounting incidents in the same, raw manner:

(...) Reports have been received by UN Security that on 29-Apr-08 on the road between Duk Padiet and Potap a GTZ water tanker escorted by SPLA soldiers was ambushed and fired upon by armed men dressed in military uniform resulting in the injury of 2 soldiers. UN Security continues to monitor the security situation.

(...) Reports have been received by UN Security that on 24-Apr-08 a cattle raid occurred in Mareng resulting in the lost of 60 goats and 3 heads of cattle. There were no reports of deaths or injuries. UN Security continues to monitor the security situation in the area. (ASMT report 2nd May 2008)

The risk was made visible through the statistical table which was filled out at UNMIS office and circulated via email to all aid organisations in the area. Once these incidents were reported they could not be dismissed. The ASMT tables acted as proof of the difficult situation on the ground. They were used in project proposals, reports and briefs and legitimised the need for intervention. In addition, they were sometimes used as an excuse for the failure to implement some of the development projects.

But these security issues were also used to shape the internal dynamics of the aid organisations. Most aid organisations have some sort of security procedures and 'security instructions' for its employees. In STW, the document which concerned the situation in South Sudan warned the development worker:

Behaviour: Do not think you are cleverer than local people. South Sudanese have been dealing with aid workers for decades and know very well what they want to hear and how to approach them in order to get what they want. Avoid taking pictures especially of the naked men by the river. It is advised to ask before taking any pictures. People are afraid you will publish pictures in magazines and others will laugh, or that you are working for 'Arab' intelligence, or that you will use their images for magic.

The cattle are the most important thing in Dinka and Nuer men's lives, therefore you should never offend the cows, laugh at or mistreat them. To accuse men of stealing milk or cows is a serious offense. (...)

Men shall be particularly careful with how they express their views, as they are considered by local men as competition and 'power games' are always an issue.

Law and custom: hitting a cow or human by car causes fury among the local people. Therefore, it is prohibited for international staff to drive vehicles. It is also prohibited to give lifts to other individuals except when someone is seriously ill and needs medical assistance.

Such forms of 'analysis' are not unique to STW. They are part of the staff training and development education campaigns. In these narratives special attention is given to issues of culture, which often is described in a nineteenth century fashion. Culture is essentialised and presented as a collection of various fun facts ('The cattle are the most important thing in Dinka and Nuer men's lives'). Following the logic of culture clashes these documents promote a worldview according to which cultural differences are both natural and unavoidable (Hoogvelt, 2001; Huntington, 1997). The promotion of such deterministic vision does not help to understand the actual problems. Rather, it suggests that their comprehension is beyond grasp (Spies, 2016). It establishes boundaries and demarcations between aid workers and local communities. It is a fatalistic vision. It successfully prevents development workers from any attempts to expand their knowledge about the realities on the ground, and as Baaz notices, these who actually do try to transgress cultural differences, are quickly ridiculed by their colleagues as naive (Baaz, 2005, p. 49).

The organisation's efforts to make the violence visible had multiple consequences. Most importantly, it perpetuated the association of the African locations with a lack of safety. It allowed STW to impose such regulations upon its European staff members that facilitated better control of the personnel. They concerned movement restrictions, living spaces, lifestyles etc. They were visible not only in the organisational protocols and official regulations,

but were internalised into everyday behaviour, the way relations and conversations were structured. One day, during one of the ASMT meetings Marcel leaned over to me and said in a semi joking voice: 'I heard they are betting in Warsaw which of their missions they will have their first casualty at, I guess we have quite a chance to win in this category'. The meeting was particularly busy, many violent incidents were reported, and at some level, Marcel seemed to enjoy the fact that he could experience this specific 'rough' and 'dangerous' environment – he got as close as he could to live up to the 'aid worker hero' ideal.

The officially promoted discourse in the NGO was the one which was taking security issues seriously. The NGO paid attention to arranging necessary insurances, put special procedures in place. At the same time, the employees were expected not show any sign of weakness or fear. Danger was not an obstacle, but rather a challenge, which good aid worker should be ready to face. At the time of my fieldwork, STW management decided to open a new office in Error. It was not clear what would be the purpose of the new mission, but it was already determined that it would be run by Zofia. However, at some point Marcel complained to me that she might not have what it takes: 'she is constantly asking about Error, when to go there, what to do there, how everything will be arranged, she seems nervous'. Her practical questions were interpreted by him as a sign of weakness, and fear to commit to work in an isolated region. Just like Zofia's commitment to the professional identity was constantly evaluated by her superiors, so was I often tested on the same grounds. At the beginning of my fieldwork, when travelling in a car from Juba to Bor, Marcel informed me, 'There were some killings today on the road ... I didn't want to tell you but I guess you should know'. I wondered what my reaction should be: should I have refused to get in the car? What was I to do with this information? I was only three weeks into my stay in Sudan and still wondered how to 'live out' the development persona: should I object to travelling after hearing such a comment? Eventually I got into the car. I did not want to look like I did not have what it took to be a development worker. Fifty kilometres away from Juba, we were listening on the cassette player to Two Face Idibia and enjoying the bumpy ride in our newly purchased second- or third-hand Land Cruiser. We were enjoying ourselves, not thinking of the earlier discussion. While still in the car Marcel asked, 'Did you ever think that you would travel through Africa like that? Isn't that amazing?'

Transgressions: negotiating 'work in crisis'

Most of the studies concerned with foreign aid and security describe the world of aid workers as driven by the rational, cause and effect process, in which objectively dangerous working environment begs for the creation of special institutional procedures that will help to protect aid workers (Roth, 2011, 2015). But as I showed above these processes are neither straight-forward nor one directional. Procedures are motivated by the duty to care that organisations have over their employees. But they also play a very important role in shaping views, values and ideologies of the aid workers. They contribute to the 'work in crisis' imaginary, which in return, simultaneously is informing the creation of additional procedures. Even before aid workers set their foot in a foreign country their perception is already influenced by briefings, contracts and multiple instructions. The 'truth' about what it means to be aid worker is not only shaped by documents, but also informal techniques. It is actively promoted by those in the positions of power (managers, leaders, established workers) through conversations, behaviours and lifestyles they practice and expect from their colleagues. Their power is at

best visible in the moments in which aid workers attempt to question 'the work in crisis' paradigm or transgress the rules, and when they are punished or rewarded for their behaviour.

During my fieldwork in South Sudan, Marcel told me a story of an STW employee with whom he used to work in Sri Lanka. According to Marcel, the man was so dedicated to his work that even when he got seriously ill, he refused to see a doctor:

He had a fever of 40 degrees, he was dehydrated and fainting occasionally, yet he didn't want to stop working or see the doctor. We had to call the HQ in Warsaw for support, so they would force him to get help. He didn't want any assistance. It was very serious yet he wanted to be this superhero.

Marcel was clearly put off by this attitude – the exaggeration of the promoted value of sacrifice. Yet his view was in opposition to the organisational standard: the dedication of this above mentioned aid worker was in a long run rewarded with the promotion. In comparison, another story of the STW employee, who worked in Afghanistan and who executed a completely opposite attitude in similar circumstances, and was punished was referred to me by several other aid workers. It also became a subject of a public debate on the Internet. According to several accounts, upon getting seriously sick this aid worker requested medical evacuation, but the NGO was very reluctant to provide it. It was dragging the process requesting extra evidence from the expat to prove the severity of his state. At some point, when it seemed that the NGO was not willing to bring him back to Poland, his wife decided to fly in and seek help from Polish soldiers stationed in the area. They agreed to help. Eventually, the man was brought back to Poland and hospitalised immediately. Soon after, he left the organisation. While the STW leader claims he was not fired, she admitted that he received official reprimand, ostensibly because he had broken the organisational rules, which forbid families to stay at the mission site. His wife's presence in Afghanistan, despite the circumstances, was interpreted as a violation of an institutional regulation. While his contract was not terminated he was strongly criticised and accused of 'letting Afghanistan people down' by giving in to his weakness.

This man's story was not the only instance in which the transgression of the 'work in crisis' paradigm, and the inability to perform the ideals which define aid workers as exceptionally resilient, created a conflict. This was also the case of Zofia, who throughout her tenure in South Sudan was always appraised by her employers for good organisational skills and effectiveness. However, after few months she developed serious health problems. One day, during a monitoring visit of the Desk Officer to the Southern Sudanese mission she had a high fever and was resting in a tent. Her inability to work in spite of the health issues (which stood in sharp contrast with the values promoted by the STW) was questioned: 'are you really that sick?' Eventually, she left Sudan, but not due to the health reasons, but because of an R&R which had been scheduled much earlier. However, upon arriving in Warsaw she continued being sick and ended up hospitalised for a couple of weeks. During her stay in the hospital, she received emails, texts and personal visits from Warsaw staff, who were asking about her condition. According to Zofia, the management's action was not motivated by the concern over its employee's wellbeing. In the contrary, in spite of her health problems they were pushing for her quick return to South Sudan. When she refused, not only the seriousness of her condition was questioned, but also her commitment to the job. Her request for an extra break was seen as a nuisance, an unnecessary obstacle to the aid mission.

She started receiving signals from the Warsaw management that she did not have what it takes to be an aid worker.

Interestingly, among all the stories of conflict within aid organisations that I collected throughout my fieldwork, none related to the disagreements over actual work duties, but instead over codes of conduct and aid workers' refusal to subscribe to the notions of 'work in crisis'. People left STW for many reasons, but those who left conflicted, did so not because they failed to deliver the work they were contracted to do. They left, or were pushed to leave because they rejected or failed to live up to the 'work in crisis' idea.

In fact, at the end of my stay in South Sudan there was no one left at the mission site from the original team. But only Marcel left the organisation because of the problems with performing his duties. Still, he was seen as an excellent aid worker – he was following his official job description and perhaps even more importantly, he was living up to the professional identity set up by the NGO. Even though, like all expatriates present in South Sudan he did transgress the organisational rules many times, still most of his ideas about the job and the location he came to assist were in line with the visions promoted by the Warsaw headquarters. Significantly, even when his quality of work decreased, and he made some mistakes while managing the mission, he still parted way from the NGO in a friendly manner. In fact, he and the Desk Officer with whom he negotiated his leaving made sense of his difficulties with managing the mission in a way which fitted perfectly with the discourses surrounding the job. Marcel's problems were blamed on the external circumstances: harsh working environment and long time exposure to the 'work in crisis'.

It is hard to imagine any other industry (perhaps with an exception of religious and military institutions) which would in such an engaged, active and structural way be invested in governing the professional identities and lifestyles of its employees. Why then there is so much effort invested in this practice? If we accept the findings of Mbembe and Roitman (1995) who argue that crisis is not spectacular, but instead mundane and prosaic, why do aid organisations put so much emphasis on producing an image of the 'work in crisis' which seems completely opposite – extraordinary and full of unexpected risks and dangers?

As I already suggested above, the discourse promoting 'work in crisis' imaginary allows organisations to create and enforce various procedures and measures aimed at governing not only work but also lifestyles of their employees. The specific geographical and institutional fragmentation of the industry, in which the organisational owners, leaders and managers are separated from the most crucial operational sites and employees – fieldworkers – by hundreds of miles results in practical managerial difficulties. In the industry in which failure to deliver promised outcomes is not an exception but a rule, the measuring of the employees' effectiveness simply through monitoring projects progress becomes problematic. The promotion of 'work in crisis' identity which covers a wide range of working and living areas gives organisations particularly strong power. As Fechter and Hindman (2012) have noted, the identities and professional profiles promoted in the industry are often contrasting and simultaneously exclusive. It is practically impossible to follow all the rules – vide Marcel's case, who on one day criticises a colleague from Sri Lanka for not taking care of his health, but on another occasion he easily subscribes to the ideals promoted in the NGO by working while being sick. In STW, like in many other NGOs, aid workers were constantly negotiating the behavioural models promoted by their organisation: they were disputing them, breaking and twisting them. Also organisational approach to these rules was fluid: often managers were aware of the transgressions, and turned a blind eye to them. But this ostensible

flexibility was not making things easier for the aid workers, but was actually giving additional power to the organisational leaders. It was solely at the discretion of those in power to decide which instances of breaking the rules deserve disciplinary steps, and which can be left without further action. It was up to them to decide who 'deserved' disciplining, and when. This specific working environment which operates through control and moves the boundaries of private and professional far beyond what would be acceptable in another professional setting, in fact was giving STW particularly strong position in employee – employer relations.

But these tools and strategies are not only used to manage the personnel, but first and foremost aid workers' ideas about the Global South, development and their role within it. The 'work in crisis' paradigm contributes to the perception of the development locations in schematic and stereotypical ways. Through the production and promotion of discourses which were describing the world in simplistic manners STW was working against a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the locations it aimed to assist. As a result, aid workers rarely made effort to understand the world they came to change. If the Polish expatriates were following all the STW regulations and guidelines their life in Sudan would be strongly separated from the Sudanese people, and would be filled with prejudice and stereotypes.

This finding stands in sharp contrast with the public perception of aid organisations who in their home countries are often involved in campaigns fighting with prejudice and racism. Also researchers, for instance Silk (2004) and Ollif (2001), argued that while the process of orientalising often plays an important role in motivating an interest in foreign aid, once development workers visit the South, their old views are reviewed and their knowledge about distant societies gets more sophisticated. Unfortunately, my research has less optimistic conclusions. It shows that organisational policies, procedures and informal strategies that define development pursuit in terms of the 'work in crisis' not only contribute to orientalisation, but actively prevent any attempts of changing this perspective.

To illustrate my point I want to go back to the story of Zofia whose involvement in foreign aid we followed since her first interview for the STW. For her, and few other aid workers I met during my fieldwork, the participation in the foreign aid industry led to the formulation of a very critical perspective. As noted earlier, her decision to quit working for STW was prompted by health problems. That was official reason for terminating her contract. But what really prevented her from continuing her work with the organisation was her frustration with the ways in which the NGO management was crafting the professional identity of aid workers, interfering and controlling their lives. She was uneasy with the ways those visions were based on, and were contributing to the further reproduction of stereotypical, often racist thinking about African locations.

Zofia herself claimed to be obsessed with Africa. She was eager to work there since her undergraduate years. Yet she was not a typical Afrophile. She did not decorate her flat in Warsaw with masks, paintings and instruments brought from the distant continent. In fact, during her stay in South Sudan she did not explore her interest in the oral history, storytelling and other cultural phenomena which had fascinated her during her studies. This was not because she lost interest in them, or was too busy. She consciously decided to not take that path because she was fearing of falling into the trap of the overexcited visitor who gets hyped up about everything 'African', everything 'Other'. In his famous 'Black Skins, White Masks', Fanon writes: 'To us the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him' (Fanon, 1967, p. 2). I do not know if Zofia was aware of this notion, though she

had Fanon in her book collection, but she was fully aware of its implications. She was afraid of becoming a stereotypical Afrophile who adored 'Black African Culture'. But at the same time, she refused signing up to the rules set up by the NGO which were emphasising the difference between the local people and aid workers and creating separation. She was eager to hang out with local people and build close relationships.

Zofia's exemplary unrest was familiar to some other developers I met during my fieldwork. Originally, many of these aid workers joined the industry with the hope of working against stereotypical forms of representations, and their political and economic effects. However, the development experience did not help them to tackle these issues. In fact, they felt that the procedures promoted by the employers were only reinforcing orientalist perceptions of the world. At the same time, the relationships they were building with local people (often against the advice or permission of their NGO superiors) were contradicting all the notions promoted by their employers. But, through the imposition of 'work in crisis' norms, the aid industry has been preventing any change in dominant discourses. Significantly, most of these critical developers left their posts, or were pushed to resign for transgressing the norms exhibited by the 'work in crisis' imaginary. With time, these individuals became critical of the ways in which development operates, and became strongly disappointed with their hiring institutions. While the public image of foreign aid organisations is the one fostering debate and fighting prejudice STW proved to have very conservative approach and gave very little freedom to its staff to discuss issues of the utmost importance in their profession. The employees who did not subscribe to the promoted discourses on 'work in crisis' did not have their contracts prolonged, were fired, or pushed into resigning. In the end, what was originally their reason for taking the job became the reason to end the development adventure.

This mechanism allows to create an industry which rewards, and keeps in, only those who are subscribing to development ideology. As Rist put it, development requires 'a kind of collective certainty: their concrete forms may be debatable, and they may even be doubted in private, but it would be improper to question their validity in public' (Rist, 2002, p. 22). Rist suggests, that development operates as a form of global faith. As I have demonstrated, if this belief in development is to be effective people must be made to act in certain way. The act of belief is performative – hence all the emphasis on the lifestyles, dos and don'ts in the industry. That is why all the rules are formalised and institutionalised in the policy papers, briefings, codes of conducts and procedures, and also incorporated into the informal organisational practices. And that is why, all those who start to lose their faith in aid industry – question its rules and norms – are subjected to different forms of governmentality and peer pressure, or, if they fail to correct their behaviour, are let go.

Development Believers can have their doubts but they should not refute the main ideas behind the concept of development. And the notions promoted through 'work in crisis' very strongly feed into the mainstream discourse of development. They legitimise foreign intervention by emphasising the sense of urgency and exceptional conditions – a crisis. Secondly, by underlining the differences between aid workers and those who are to be developed, organising them in oppositional terms, and promoting separation they contribute to the idea that development should and can be achieved only through the engagement of a special class of external professionals, development experts, who not only have knowledge but also all these extra skills to 'survive' in the job. Through painting aid work in terms of the mission they are giving a superior meaning to the role of aid worker, a foreign leader of the

development change. Consequently, they are linking development, to foreign aid, an external intervention.

The notion of 'work in crisis' produces the knowledge about distant societies. The governmentality it enforces takes place in the Global South. But the main addressees of this concept are societies of the Global North. Among them, of course, are the aid workers themselves. But their role is double: they implement development projects, but they are also poster girls and boys of the industry. Their image attracts newcomers to the movement and plays an important role in fundraising schemes. Overall, it plays a particularly important role in validating the industry existence at large. Foreign aid is a controversial endeavour. Donor societies are often questioning the need to engage abroad while there are so many poverty issues to be addressed at home. General public have also little trust in aid effectiveness (Anderson, 1998; Hudson & van Heerde, 2009; Olsen, 2001; Otter, 2003). The maintaining of the 'work in crisis' imaginary is in line with the industry need to sustain itself and convince the public that its work is needed. It supports small organisations fundraising campaigns, but also helps states to justify to taxpayers the use of public money for aid. It allows to elevate the development industry above other professions, as it defines it as a moral labour, which can be undertaken exclusively by specially selected individuals.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the conceptualisation of the aid activities in terms of 'work in crisis' is not simply a matter of stereotypes, or individuals' world views. Instead it is an institutionalised practice reproduced via 'scientific' practices of assessments, briefing papers and safety instructions as well as informal practices and values promoted by aid organisations. They are explained in rational terms, as a response to the risky environment, an expression of the duty to care. However, the interviews and participant observation conducted for this research suggest that this pattern of thinking about development and humanitarian aid is a carefully orchestrated and strongly promoted norm within a foreign the industry. It is fostered by the senior development professionals and institutionalised in the organisational structures. It is permeating the ways in which development locations and societies are being defined, but also defines professional relations in the industry, allowing aid organisations to manage not only the work of their staff members, but also their lifestyles and personal life choices. As a result, behavioural models of mind and body control are actively incorporated into organisational regimes. The imposition of these norms starts at the recruitment process, and continues throughout the duration of the employment. It allows aid organisations to retain control over their most crucial employees, and make sure that they will remain devoted and allegiant followers of a development movement.

Notes

1. The term 'mission' is frequently used by the aid workers to describe their work and their endeavours abroad. For my detailed analysis of the term see below.
2. In this paper, I changed the names of my informants and the organisations they represent. However, as the Polish development scene, due to its nascent state, is a relatively small world, the anonymization of the data is particularly difficult, and in some ways a futile endeavour. That is why, in order to protect my informants, I decided to use strategy which has often been used in social sciences (Humphreys & Watson, 2009; Sparkes, 2007; Wertz, Nosek, McNiesh,

& Marlow, 2011), and build ethnography in which people and stories composite characters based on a mashup of different individuals and narratives, that I encountered both during my fieldwork in South Sudan and while collecting interviews in Poland.

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