Two project participants stand in front of their vegetable kiosk. Jonglei State, South Sudan, 2009.

ELZBIETA DRAŻKIEWICZ

GOSSIP IN THE AID INDUSTRY

FOR INTERNATIONAL AID WORKERS, GOSSIP IS A MEANS OF NAVIGATING A COMPLEX INDUSTRY AND ACQUIRING ESSENTIAL INFORMATION.

By Elzbieta Drążkiewicz

All we have to do now
Is take these lies and make them true somehow
—George Michael, Freedom

The project was coming to an end. The only thing left to do was to write a final report for the donor: the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). All planned objectives achieved, all planned outcomes realized. The desk officer who was supervising our Sudan project from the Warsaw headquarters of our NGO, suggested getting some "good photos" of the experimental gardens—the core site of the project's activities. "People in the Ministry need evidence of the project's success, you know how they are…They love such things."

I did not meet anyone from the ministry during fieldwork (at least not until long after I left South Sudan). Perhaps, I exchanged an email or two with ministerial staff, but not much more. All communication upstream went through the desk officer and other official channels. Yet, I felt I knew their likes, their dislikes, and their paperwork desires. Aid workers gossiped endlessly about them; gossip was essential to how aid workers did their job, to how they navigated the organizational peculiarities of the international aid industry.

REVEALING RUMORS

The aid industry has grown significantly in the last few decades, encompassing actors of all shapes and sizes: state representatives, transnational organizations, civil society players, commercial outfits, academic institutions, the list goes on. Although expanded and fragmented, stakeholders at all levels of the industry from mega organizations of the United Nations kind, to small nonprofits such as the Polish NGO with whom I worked in South Sudan, are highly dependent on one another. Big donors require implementing bodies to turn their development visions into realities; implementing bodies need external funders to sustain their daily operations and carry out their own plans. Aid workers located in the Global South and East, but representing organizations based in the Global North and West need administrative, public relations, and fundraising support from organizational headquarters. And, of course, they also rely on working relationships with local partners and vice versa. All these actors are connected by goals, schemes, projects, and programs, but they are simultaneously detached by power relations, by personal and institutional agendas, and by geographical distances.

To work together to fulfill joint goals, but also to simply manage the daily responsibilities of project implementation, the various stakeholders need to know each other, or at least about one other's standards, expectations, goals, values, and priorities. Yet, in such a vast and splintered industry this knowing is based not on face-to-face or direct relationships, but on gossip, rumor, and the circulation

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of second-hand information. In South Sudan, the continual speculation about other stakeholders in the form of snarky comments, banal chatter, or frequent gossip sessions revealed crucial information about individuals and institutions. Gossip worked like a compass, enabling aid workers to navigate the maze of actors and bureaucracy with confidence.

SOMEBODY TOLD ME

In the aid industry, gossip was an essential tool of the trade, a means of grasping at the ever-elusive organizational totality of the industry. It was what David Sneath, Martin Holbraad, and Morten Axel Pedersen (2009) might term "technology of the imagination": a way of bringing to mind what was not entirely visible to the senses. Aid workers combed a variety of sources, stitching together gossip, rumor, and bits of information; filling the gaps in their knowledge with conjecture and hunches. In this world where information was crucial yet always insufficient, gossip was as good a communication technology as any other. Perhaps it was better: it linked what was known and official with what was hidden; it did not discriminate between particular ways of knowing.

During my research in South Sudan, but also when I moved to Warsaw to work with other NGOs, we gossiped about this powerful institution "the ministry" as if it were a person. We vented about ministerial policies and rules as if they were the creation of a single government bureaucrat. We dwelled on opportunities for revealing hidden truths about their life. Gossip was speculative, but at the same time it created an air of certainty, giving those engaging in gossip a confidence bordering on arrogance: In South Sudan, we did not wonder why "those people in the ministry" needed photographs or what kind of photographs they wanted. We *already knew*. Or at least we thought we did. "They sit in their comfortable offices, thousands of miles away. There is no way they will come here, to see with their own eyes what is going on in South Sudan," we complained. "All the written statements, hundreds of invoices

and other forms of project documentation are not enough," we said. "They have no idea about doing aid work, about things that really matter here," we thought.

As my speculations about the motivations of "those people in the ministry" spiralled out of control, a colleague and I drove to a project location to take the requested photographs. I took photographs that I hoped would satisfy the needs and desires of people in the MFA. I wanted to give them a visual sense of the project: its location, scale, and the people who were involved. The next day, I sent the photographs to the desk officer in Warsaw. The response was not favorable, "They will not like them. The Polish Aid logo is missing and this is the only thing the ministry cares about!" The desk officer cited ministeri-

al obsession with building their brand, with showing the world what a successful philanthropist Poland can be.

Gossip helped aid workers to overcome geographical and institutional distance from the ministry. Yet, it was also a means of marking boundaries and alliances in a proliferating, multitudinous aid industry in which everybody seems to use the same buzz words, slogans, images, and narratives (see for example, Green 2003). Gossip facilitated the maintenance of separation, in keeping with a particular Polish version of civil society discourse, which defines NGOs in opposition to the state (Drążkiewicz 2016). Even if our gossip revolved around such technical or banal issues of project management as photographic documentation, it still included an

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Eggplant. Photograph to show garden produce and demonstrate project success. Jonglei State, South Sudan, 2009.

Working in the garden. During the dry season, water for the garden was brought straight from the White Nile. Jonglei State, South Sudan, 2008.

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Equipped with my moral superiority, which was good enough to motivate my gossiping about the MFA with other NGO workers, but not strong enough for us to resist what we believed were misguided ministerial expectations, I set off once again to take photographs. This time I took a stack of small stickers emblazoned with the Polish Aid logo, attached them to a stick, and pushed it into the ground between the rows of vegetables, like a plant label. I put stickers on watering cans, jerry cans, and wheelbarrows. It all felt ridiculous, ethically flawed, and very much against anthropological criticism of the humanitarian imaginary (see for example, Benthall 2010) or even the "Code of Conduct on Images and Messages" promoted by development sector itself. At the last minute, I took one more photograph of the kiosk built to sell garden produce with two proud gardeners standing in front of it. After hearing all the stories and rumors about the MFA and their preferences from my desk officer, I was no longer sure if the ministry officials would care for the photograph. But, we needed evidence that the kiosks were built and handed over to the project's participants, so I sent this photograph together with the other images.

AN INFORMATION ECONOMY

At the time of my fieldwork, the work of the NGO's Sudan office was almost fully dependent on MFA funding. As well as writing final reports for completed projects, we were preparing applications for the upcoming call for project proposals. Our Warsaw superiors made it clear that if we failed to win grants from the MFA, the office might be closed down, and our "adventures in aidland" (to quote the title of David Mosse's 2011 book on the social life of development professionals) might end. But, securing such a grant is no easy feat.

With growing numbers of applicants, new mechanisms are invented and reinvented to manage funding allocations in the industry. The proliferation of aid

actors, the need to secure "fair" access to public funding, anti-corruption processes, and a preoccupation with professionalization and institutionalization leads to the establishment of funding mechanisms that require applicants to construct narratives that provide as much information about themselves and their initiatives as possible. Meanwhile, information about decision-making processes and about how funding is allocated and by whom is limited to basic data or technological jargon. Decisions are made behind closed doors; protocols are often opaque and classified: "We regret to inform applicants that on this occasion due to the large number of applicants, feedback will not be provided." To prevent corruption, contact between applicant and funding body is kept to a minimum. Instead, and to manage the flow of information, special official channels of communication are created from dedicated helplines through call documentation to webpages filled with Frequently Asked Questions.

Yet, the more information is controlled, the more it becomes an asset. Describing the life of humanitarian camps for refugees and internally displaced people in Georgia, Elizabeth Cullen Dunn (2017) suggests that neoliberal regimes of "fair competition" in aid distribution lead to feelings of suspicion and paranoia among those who compete for the limited resources. In such a competitive environment, in which grants are lifelines for organizations and for people, any additional, unofficial tidbits offer a comparative advantage. Gossip, rumor, and speculation become valuable currency. As Clare Birchall notes in _Knowledge Goes Pop_ (2006), gossip can provide those who lack access to or control over information with the means to create their own narratives about systems that might otherwise marginalize them. Paradoxically, although gossip is seen as unprofessional in the aid industry, it plays an essential role in obtaining knowledge that can help to secure grants and further careers. It is these more clandestine communication channels, and the production and circulation of unofficial knowledge that determine

A framed proverb bought by fellow aid workers at a market in Juba, South Sudan, as a gift for the author.

the success or failure of individual careers, projects, and organizations. It is through a rumor about a ministry process here, a piece of gossip about a particular official there, that aid workers come to "know" the ministry, manage project cycles, and craft effective funding applications.

THOSE WHO TELL YOU ABOUT OTHERS, WILL TELL OTHERS ABOUT YOU

After months spent working with NGOs and participating in the gossip mill about the ministry, l began to become as preoccupied with the MFA as my NGO colleagues. Determined to learn more about the workings of this mysterious institution, I applied for an internship position. My first assignment as an intern was to work on the annual report in the public relations and global education section of the Department for Development Cooperation. Going through proofs, I came across one of my photographs from Sudan, taken almost a year before—the one with two women standing in front of the kiosks; the one I did not believe the ministry would be interested in. My supervisor had no idea who had taken the image that she was using in her document. Laughing, she called me to her desk, and showing me my

photographs of vegetables and Polish Aid stickers, she asked with a smirk, "Maybe you know which idiot took these ridiculous photos?"

A few months later, I was called to the office of one of the senior officials in the department. One of his staffers had just returned from South Sudan where she was monitoring projects implemented by Polish NGOs. She told us her positive impressions; all the projects that she visited seemed to be successful. Her only concern was the experimental gardens from the project that had concluded the previous year, and which she had been unable to see during the short visit. She hoped that perhaps I could help her fill the gaps in her knowledge about the work of the NGO on that initiative, "You know these people; maybe you know something more about this project?" 🌀

Elzbieta Drążkiewicz is a lecturer at Maynooth University. She is the author of _Institutionalised Dreams: The Art of Managing Foreign Aid_. Her research interests include organizational and political anthropology, social change, and conspiracy theories and democratic governance. She has conducted fieldwork in South Sudan, Poland, and Ireland.