

Neutrality in foreign aid

Shifting contexts, shifting meanings—examples from South Sudan

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Abstract: Since the late 1990s, researchers have been predicting that the era of neutrality in aid politics is coming to an end and that foreign organizations will have to take a more engaged stance. Yet while the boundaries between humanitarianism and development are fading, in some cases the neutrality norm is actually expanding rather than giving way to an engaged paradigm. Recognizing that the principles of neutrality and independence have different meanings for different actors and that they are applied in various ways, this article examines how the humanitarian developers—small NGOs operating in Jonglei State in South Sudan—use these paradigms. The article shows that their specific variant of neutrality is not so much a pragmatic tool enabling operations in difficult settings, but instead is a structural form of identity. In this variation, neutrality is not about the absence of a political stance, but about standing apart from social structures and social immunity.

Keywords: development, foreign aid, humanitarianism, independence, neutrality, South Sudan, state

Neutrality and independence, along with humanity and impartiality, constitute core humanitarian principles. The humanitarian variant of neutrality, the one we know from Red Cross manifestos, was developed in the specific context of 1864 and was built around the emerging order of nation-states. The humanitarian law established at that time was a response to military conflicts and was designed to enable medical treatment of wounded soldiers. This dominant variant of neutrality means that humanitarian actors do not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of political, racial, religious,

or ideological nature (Van Mierop 2015: 297). Originally it was proposed as a pragmatic tool for dealing with medical emergencies and as such was paired with the ideal of independence, which is defined as autonomy, an ability to freely determine one's actions (299). These practical principles, developed by means of a bottom-up process by medical practitioners and military officers, became over time an elaborate ethical stance concerning scholars, thinkers, and the humanitarian industry at large (Redfield 2011: 56).

While neutrality grew to represent an omnipresent virtue and to signal altruistic justice,



the world to which these rules are supposed to apply has changed significantly. Our world is no longer governed solely by nation-states, and the practice of war, its technologies, and participants vary considerably. Moreover, increasingly military operations include humanitarian action as an explicit strategy for the transformation of conflicts and societies (Duffield 2002, 2007). Humanitarian action itself has also changed significantly: nowadays it is rarely concerned only with the saving of bare life (Ticktin 2006; Agamben and Heller-Roazen 1998; Fassin 2007). Medical assistance is just one element of its extensive repertoire. Finally, the separation of humanitarianism from development has progressively dissolved (Feldman 2011; Slim 2000). Amid this changing global political landscape, and changing modes of humanitarian assistance, the issue of neutrality and independence is brought into question, with many debating whether it is possible and effective to maintain these principles in the twenty-first century (Duffield et al. 2001; P. O'Brien 2004; Slim 1997; Torrente 2004).

As Dorothea Hilhorst and Nadja Shmie-mann (2002), as well as Peter Redfield (2011) have pointed out, even though neutrality is on virtually everybody's lips, its meaning differs among actors and it is utilized for different ends. So far, most of the discussion concerning these principles has occurred among, and been conducted about, the most prominent players in the industry, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC; Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan 2016), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF; Redfield 2011), or Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE; Feldman 2011; P. O'Brien 2004). But what about those less vocal players that are populating the South with missions that are often singlehandedly governed by expatriates sent by a small North American or European nongovernmental organization (NGO)? These organizations are often neglected in studies of humanitarianism. For this reason, I want to draw attention to them and to examine the social life of neutrality in their compounds. How do they conceptualize it? When

and how do they use it in practice? How does its meaning differ from the dominant discourses, and how does it influence their activities on the ground?

This article is based on observations of practices and interactions within three small NGOs, which between 2007 and 2008 were operating in Bor, the capital of Jonglei State in South Sudan, and which were solely managed by European and North American expatriates. For the purposes of this article, I will call them "humanitarian developers."¹ As I will demonstrate, their understanding and usage of the principles of neutrality and independence differed considerably from dominant views. For most of them, the issue of neutrality was a matter of structural identification. In the cases described by Redfield (2006), neutrality is the paradigm used at a time when one must decide whether or not to take action (for instance, to become involved in advocacy). In the Jonglei of the late 2000s, neutrality was not such an active choice, but rather a passive concept: humanitarian developers were neutral, not in their ethical choices and stances on political issues, but in their structural positioning. The "not taking sides" approach typical for the ICRC or MSF variant of neutrality, which was envisioned as a special attitude reserved for the most dramatic situations, was, in the case of these small NGOs, related to the expediency of avoiding relations with local authorities, and was used as a justification for bypassing them. This framing was a result of the dissolving difference between humanitarianism and development (Slim 2000). This article shows the consequences of maintaining an emphasis on neutrality amid the changing landscape of foreign aid and the convergence of development and humanitarianism. I will present two case studies from the postwar, preindependence Jonglei State in South Sudan: one involves the relocation of international nongovernmental organizations (INGO) compounds from the city center to the distant outskirts of Bor; the other involves a scandal surrounding an article published in the *Sudan Tribune* criticizing the work of INGOs in Jonglei. The choice of the case studies is not in-

cidental. Most writing concerning questions of neutrality and participation focus on the activities of the aid agencies that belong to their core mandate (Paulmann 2016). By shifting the attention from projects to the backstage of NGO activities, I want to demonstrate how strongly the ideals, which are set up for the very narrow context of humanitarian aid delivery, in fact infiltrate all different aspects of aid workers' lives.

The events presented here took place shortly after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). At that time Jonglei State, and its capital of Bor, was not fully disarmed and still experienced insecurity (A. O'Brien 2009). According to Small Arms Survey, most of the conflicts were long-standing and stemmed from the civil war, but they were exacerbated by drought and food shortages, and related migration conflicts among pastoralist communities and between pastoralists and agriculturalists (McEvoy and LeBrun 2010: 21). Nevertheless, this period stood out as a relatively peaceful time. In the course of history, Bor, as the capital of one of the most politically important states, has become witness to atrocities of the Second Sudanese Civil War: the rebellion of 1983, which led to the birth of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, and the 1991 massacre of the Dinka tribesmen, in which estimated 2,000 civilians were killed. The postindependence period has also been marked by ethnically motivated killings of Bor's inhabitants. In this context, the short period post-CPA and preindependence stood out as particularly peaceful and optimistic, with many hopeful South Sudanese (as well as Darfurians, Ethiopians, Ugandans, and Kenyans) repopulating the town and planning their lives and investments there. The boom and the development specific to that time is only one brief history amid the complicated and often dramatic history of that region. Under these circumstances, the separation between development and humanitarian foreign aid becomes especially fluid, which, as I will demonstrate below, has a considerable impact on the way the relations between local authorities and foreign aid providers are shaped.

Humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence and humanitarian developers

The expansion of INGOs in South Sudan since the 1990s was made possible through the (at least partial) abandonment of the neutrality paradigm. The provision of humanitarian aid and emergency food to the areas most affected by conflict, namely, the regions controlled by the rebels in the long-running Second Sudanese Civil War, required reconsideration of issues of sovereignty, the right to intervene, neutrality, and independence (Levine 1997; Taylor-Robinson 2002). Mark Duffield (2002) and Volker Riehl (2001) have suggested that the events that took place at that time opened up possibilities for a major shift in global aid politics, making room for the interventionist and engagement approach. Today, while South Sudan is again facing military unrest, and humanitarian crises in places like Syria are extreme, and debates over "the right to intervene" are becoming particularly relevant, the issue of neutrality seems to be one of the most pressing topics in aid circles (Redfield 2011). But interestingly, in the late 2000s in Jonglei, where many of these discussions were started, most organizations were still waving the neutrality flag, making it one of the most prominent slogans of their mission statements.

However, this attachment to the neutrality and independence principles is particularly problematic in places such as Jonglei State, where the separation of humanitarianism and development has been fluid, with humanitarians often becoming developers. From the distant perspective of Europe, the area seems to be in a constant "state of urgency." Since 1983, when Dr. John Garang de Mabior led a revolt in Bor and started the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A), Jonglei and its capital became strategic in the military conflicts of South Sudan. Due to logistical limitations and wars the area often suffered from shortages of food and other supplies. The state was in need of humanitarian aid. But between 2007 and 2008, the area enjoyed relative stability and peace, and most

INGOs operating in this between-conflict setting were not involved in what is usually defined as emergency assistance. European and North American organizations discussed in this article moved in only once the fighting was over, once it was safe enough to operate. At that time, they were not dealing with life-and-death issues. Instead, they were preoccupied with projects that could easily be defined as development initiatives: drilling boreholes, building community centers, offering vocational training, providing specialized assistance to disabled people. All these actions require an engaged approach that fosters relationships with various stakeholders: to achieve change, local politics must be taken into account and included in the process (P. O'Brien 2004). In fact, the maintaining of the neutrality paradigm in this context hinders the possibility of any meaningful partnerships with local communities that would enable sustainable effects. Yet, the aid workers operating in Jonglei in this post-CPA era rarely questioned the neutrality and independence paradigms.

Relocation: Who is ruling in Bor?

When I arrived in Bor in 2007,² the town was flourishing. Even though there were only few permanent buildings in place, many constructed out of sheet iron and a mixture of wooden scaffolding and fabric, it was clear that the town was rapidly developing: people were making their way back home from their war-caused displacement; shops, restaurants, and hotels were being opened; schools and administrative institutions were starting to operate; occasional festivities were organized in the main square. The town also became a host for several foreign aid organizations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies. Most of them had their offices in the town center. Renting plots of land from private owners, they secured for themselves those few properties in town that were of brick-and-mortar construction. Still, the staff themselves often lived in tents, as there was not enough housing in the area to facilitate any better accommodations.

Among this international cohort was also a Polish organization—an INGO whose work was the main focus of my research. When I arrived, its compound was placed at the very outskirts of town, near the airstrip, in the area called Pakwawou. It was a new location. The INGO was previously based, like the other organizations, in the very center of Bor. Yet upon the request of the local administration it moved to this area, which according to the new town planning was designated as the center for agents of development—INGOs, UN agencies, businesses, hotels, and so forth. Here spacious plots were made available for free; no rent was to be paid. However, the district was located in the middle of the bush; the land had to be cleared, and all facilities needed to be built from scratch. Some plots were located by the main road, while others were positioned by roads that were only in the planning stage. These hardships were, however, not unusual in South Sudan. Excluded from modernization schemes, the country was lacking even the most basic infrastructure.

Nonetheless, when I arrived in town, there were only two organizations that had actually moved to Pakwawou—the Polish one and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO). The speedy move of the Polish NGO was motivated by its poor financial situation: the prospect of a rent-free office, even if it required some investment in construction work, was a welcomed one. Most other organizations were planning to move sometime in the near future, yet no work was actually done to facilitate this. Among them was a small, western organization managed by three expatriates: Alice, Jerome, and Nadya. They were all living and working in a town center, in a compound with no permanent buildings and with tents serving as residential and office spaces. The plot they were offered in Pakwawou was much more spacious. But according to Alice and Jerome, their town location was more secure.

Even though Pakwawou was in close proximity to the airstrip and the United Nation Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) base, where the Blue Helmets were stationed, and from where they facil-

itated shelter and evacuation in high-risk cases, it was also there where, just over the fence of the Polish compound, SPLA soldiers arranged their temporary settlement. In the month preceding my arrival some shootings had taken place. However, this was attributed to alcohol and unresolved animosities among the SPLA soldiers themselves, rather than to any conflict-related fighting. Soon the soldiers moved out anyway, and the area became very quiet. Still no organization started any building works, as now the area seemed “too quiet” for some expatriates. While those living in town had all the facilities they needed within walking distance, the move to Pakwawou meant dependence on cars. There were no shops or restaurants nearby. The district was separated from the town center by a few kilometers. This was particularly problematic when curfews prevented any pedestrian or car movement outside the town.

Clearly, all these issues and personal preferences of the INGO personnel had an impact on their decision of whether or not to move. But as the main, official reason, Alice and Jerome pointed to the lack of an access road. Their plot was not designated by the main road. In vain they expected the government to provide access, while the authorities expected organizations to clear a road strip by themselves. Annoyed by the lack of progress in these matters, the authorities asked how it was possible that INGOs had no problem with paying high rents to private owners, yet when they were getting their plots for free they could not afford to clear land for a road, but instead constantly placed demands on the state. For these authorities, the foreign organizations were resourceful agents who came to South Sudan to do development. Road building was considered a development matter, and therefore could (or should) not constitute a problem. Still, it proved to be a crucial issue in this case.

At the same time, the request to move, without granting an access road, seemed to Alice and Jerome not only unreasonable, but almost like a forced displacement pushed forward by despotic authorities. They argued that the authorities were not in a position to give orders

to their organization, because they were an NGO—a *nongovernmental* organization—and humanitarians. In this context, the “nongovernmental” was tightly linked with the notion of independence and neutrality. All characteristics were mentioned together, as if they were inseparable twins. Neutrality was understood not as an active choice of refusing to support either side in an armed conflict, but rather as a means of separation from the stakeholders. To follow the request of the local authorities was, in their estimation, equivalent to admitting accountability to them. It would also imply that this INGO was subsumed within local hierarchies. Even though at that time this NGO was not addressing humanitarian crises (local conflicts were in hibernation and people were hoping that the war times were behind them), ideas about neutrality were still influencing the behavior of the aid providers.

At that time, Alice and Jerome were using the ethical power of neutrality to validate their choice to not be part of the existing power order. Their choice was justified by the implicit assumptions about the oppressive nature of the local elites. The high-ranking authorities were accused of having hostile attitudes. Irrespective of the actual state of affairs, equipped with their own imported presumptions about what constitutes a good politician, foreign workers were calling up the military past of Sudanese leaders as evidence of their aggressive behavior and as an argument against fostering any collaboration. This was especially the case when Kuol Manyang was appointed as governor of Jonglei State. He took the position in 2007 amid expanding concerns about the growing insecurity in the area. I learned about his appointment from Jerome, who looked visibly worried about his arrival: “he has blood on his hands, he is ruthless ... it will be tough.” For Jerome, Manyang was the embodiment of the typical “African ruler” who got into a position of power in unclear circumstances, and whose career was strongly linked to the military.

Jerome got most of his information about the new governor from the local staff of his NGO,

yet his employees had a rather different perspective on this new appointment. Even though they were very well aware of Manyang's career path, and were hoping for peace, they were not angered by the appointment of the new governor. Among them he had made himself known through his military background, and he had a reputation of being a strong political leader. He was from the area; he was one of those present in Bor County during the 1991 massacre, fighting at the Garang site.³ As observed in the book by African Rights, *Food and Power in Sudan*, "[Military training] changed people's minds. Untrained people seemed inferior. *Civilian* became an insult" (1997: 82). For many of those South Sudanese who went through the years of war struggle, being a soldier, especially one with high rank, was associated with patriotism and was a sign of a strong personality—someone who was willing to fight for his people and the betterment of the country. That is why often these were the characteristics that people looked for in the Jonglei State leader in these difficult times of insecurity and state building.

Yet, many expatriates assigned a completely opposite meaning to this shift in political power: for them, the personal and professional background of the new governor was not a marker of the qualities that could be helpful in leading the state during the time of crisis, but instead was interpreted as yet another example of undemocratic, uncivilized standards governing the country. It worked as a further proof of the South Sudanese "militant culture."⁴ In Manyang's military background, what mattered was the mere fact of violence rather than the complicated politics and histories behind it. The brutality of the local men was taken for granted, and simplified as a "natural" result of war (African Rights 1997; Gallagher 2009).

Such a perception was informed by the logic of culture clashes (Huntington 1997). Expatriates operated according to the assumption that cultural differences are both natural and unavoidable. Ankie Hoogvelt, who unpacks notions of "the new barbarism" and "the new racism" with regard to global economies, security issues, and

the ways developers view internal African conflicts (2001: 193–194), notes that foreigners view mutual differences as immutable, and of an innate and nonrational quality that leads "inevitably" to interethnic conflict. Eva Spies (2016) confirms these findings, noticing that many aid workers face practical problems of understanding the other. Eventually they avoid social relations with local people, including elites. This observation could also apply in Bor, where many expatriates considered collaboration with local authorities difficult. Of course, while carrying out their core mandate, that is, during project implementations, aid workers were obliged by the principles of participation. However, the consultations with local authorities were often their least favorite part of the job. This optic played an important role in shaping the relations between expatriates and local authorities in the case concerning this specific disagreement over the access road to the NGO plot in Pakwawou.

The conflict lasted for some nine months. With the end of the dry season and the improvement of security in the region, the reorganizational works in the town took off with new speed. The process of plot allocation accelerated. The city, which immediately after the war was subjected to spontaneous resettlement, was now to become an organized structure. Special areas were designated for shopping and services, an administrative center, housing districts, and so on. The old market was closing down, and new shops were built just in the city center, where the western INGO was still based. Soon it was surrounded by small shops and restaurants whose clients had to make their way by maneuvering between the organization's large trucks parked in front of its office. The INGO's presence in the area was clearly preventing some of the work in the market and in the larger-scale reorganization and ordering of the town. Still, Jerome insisted that they would not move to Pakwawou without having their wish of the access road granted. For him, the whole issue was an example of the authorities' absurd wishes—a demonstration of power—rather than a by-product of the town's reforms and the development of Bor.

Then one day in April, while all of the expatriates were in the field on their regular duties, city officials and the police visited their compound. A couple of South Sudanese staff members who were present in the office were arrested on charges of not complying with the local town law and the eviction call. Upon their return to the office, and realizing what had just happened, Jerome and Alice were furious. For them it was the ultimate proof of the local authorities' aggressive attitudes, their inability to collaborate in a democratic manner—a final argument that cooperation is impossible and any contact with local authorities should be limited to the minimum. Yet, at this point, fearing further consequences, they finally decided to move into their new compound in Pakwawou.

For nine months the expatriates resisted all requests for relocation by referring to their inalienable right of independence. At the same time, this situation was also an expression of the local state's inalienable right of sovereignty. According to this logic, the creation of an INGO district far away from the city center could be interpreted as an attempt at decolonization (from all alien powers, including INGOs) and a process of defining local leaders' own spaces of authority, as they were building state structures anew. But for many aid workers, these politics of space were an example of a power demonstration, irrational ambition, or a ruthless attitude. It provided validation for the politics of separation practiced by the INGOs.⁵ The distancing from local authorities was validated by expatriates with what they saw as neutrality and independence paradigms. For them these ideals were part of their identification as humanitarians, and even though the Bor of 2007 and 2008 was not in a state of urgency, and the work of aid workers consisted to a large extent of developmental endeavors, they did not want to let go of their ideals, which originally were created for different realities.

These ideals prevented many small organizations from engaging with the actual political problems on the ground and fostering an effective dialogue with local authorities. Effectively,

their position in the hierarchies of power was kept ambiguous, with INGOs floating neither below nor above the state, but actually somewhere beyond local social structures. Ultimately, organizations acted as some sort of “fourth sector”—rather than a third sector, as they are understood to be in their home countries (Lewis 2011). Importantly, their version of neutrality, as we can see in the case described above, manifested through withdrawal from communication with the local authorities and techniques of avoidance. It was informed by a stereotypical, demonized perception of the ruling African elites.

Women's Day: Who is ruling in Jonglei State?

The original purpose of neutrality as a guiding principle of humanitarian initiatives was to enable assistance and to secure access to communities in crises. But in places like Bor, where humanitarian aid and development action were hardly separated, neutrality might become an obstacle rather than a facilitator in delivering aid. This is especially the case when neutrality becomes a way to exercise a politics of separation. Amid constant dependency on aid, South Sudanese have been striving for emancipation, not only from Khartoum but also from their reliance on foreign service providers. As has been pointed out by many authors (Igoe and Kellsal 2004; Manji and O'Coill 2002; Moyo 2009), dependence on foreign organizations is difficult to accept. It takes away from local people and their leaders the ability to control social services; very often it forces states and communities to comply with rules imposed by others. It weakens existing institutional capacities (for instance, by redirecting the most valuable individuals away from working for the state administration and into INGO employment), and with the mobile character of international players, it does not offer a sense of stability and sustainability. All these issues were certainly at play in Bor, and were important elements in relations between INGOs and the local state.

The frustration was aggravated by the contemporary politics of development, which are characterized by strong competition among international donors (Drażkiewicz 2013; Hattori 2003). The ongoing generosity competition enforces aggressive visibility strategies. Eventually, places like Bor are turned into advertising billboards, with donor logos marking every corner. This constant reminder to whom the local people owe their water, schools, hospital, market stalls, roads, sewing machines, laptops, and so forth, rather than generating feelings of gratitude, causes a sense of humiliation and frustration. This feeling was well depicted by the South Sudanese project coordinator in an American INGO. The funding for his project was part of financial agreements between the Government of South Sudan (GOSS) and the World Bank, but due to GOSS's lack of administrative capacities, the funding had to be channeled via a foreign NGO. As the South Sudanese manager of the large US-based NGO explained to me, this meant that the loan taken by GOSS from the World Bank now had to be transferred to the United States, and some portion of it had to be used to cover the administrative expenses of American offices. Frustrated with the whole situation, he concluded his story, "I would like to go to New York and see if they have big GOSS logos on their laptops, desks, and cars—if they are forced to come to work in T-shirts saying: my salary is sponsored by the Government of South Sudan!"

South Sudanese are constantly reminded to whom they owe their public services and infrastructure. The feelings of gratitude mix with the disempowering contestation of their own country's capacities and the anger toward the exclusive lifestyles of expatriates, who enjoy the expensive hotels and restaurants inaccessible to most local people. It is therefore not surprising that their decolonizing attempts are aimed not only at Khartoum, but also at foreign institutions. Trapped between cordial, dependency-fueled gratitude for the work of foreign donors and the necessity to build a strong independent state, the authorities maneuver hard to shift

their accountability between donors and their own home communities.

An excellent example of such friction was the case of the Women's Day celebration in Bor in March 2008. On this occasion, INGOs based in Bor received an invitation to the festivities organized on Freedom Square. The day was filled with various events: military and police parades, drama and traditional dance shows and speeches. The most important talk was given by Governor Kuol Manyang Jok. The speech was mostly in Dinka, interspersed with a few phrases in Arabic. But there were moments when the governor spoke in English. In those few moments he certainly wanted to be well understood by the international community. This was the case when he called for better cooperation between the state and INGOs. He pointed out that INGOs often neglected local structures and authorities, and while nobody really knew what they were doing, they were still present in the area. He expressed concern over the operational costs of foreign donors, noting that the money should go toward local communities and not foreign workers' salaries. He called for more effective work with more sustainable effects. He said that those organizations that had no visible results of their work would have to leave the state. Like other parts of the speech, this statement was also welcomed by applause from the audience. Yet interestingly, it left the expatriates present at the event feeling indifferent.

This changed a few days later with an article that was published in the *Sudan Tribune*. Wanda, the head of the Polish NGO, found out about it from her supervisor, Stefan, who was based in Warsaw. He was following Internet forums for aid workers operating in Sudan and spotted the discussion about the article there. He immediately contacted Wanda, suggesting that something has to be done, as the points made in the article seemed to be threatening organizational sovereignty:

March 9, 2008 (BOR, Jonglei)—Jonglei government will carry out a very tough check to the performance of non-govern-

mental organizations (NGOs) and will be forced to dismiss idle organs, Governor Kuol has said. . . . The governor, in a speech he delivered on Women's Day (March 8), has assigned the work of evaluating NGOs to his deputy Hassan Mar. The governor said NGOs [were] very idle or slow in their work but [they] deceived . . . [no-one]. They fly over us in planes but you do not [know] what they are doing! Mr. Manyang bitterly said, causing UN agency representatives at the rally to take on dejected faces. . . . But the major questions NGOs in Jonglei need to answer include: why they stay in one compound . . . thus taking a low number of casual workers, their failure to complete projects on time, and employment of foreigners as their staff in Jonglei. It will be a sad Easter holiday for some NGOs and/or staff. (Aleu 2008)

The article referred to several INGOs and UN agencies by name, among them the Polish one. On the day of the publication the Pakwawou compound of the Polish NGO was visited by Isabella, head of the mission of another organization. She was visibly aggravated. "Wanda, have you seen this? Have you seen the article?" she said to her Polish colleague. Isabella was not present at the Women's Day celebration, so she had no chance to learn about the governor's speech firsthand. She treated this piece of journalistic writing as the official statement of the Jonglei administration. She assumed that the words of the journalist—"It will be a sad Easter holiday for some NGOs"—constituted a threat by the state representative toward aid organizations and foreign workers. She quickly interpreted the piece in a way that fit with foreign aid workers' opinions about local leaders, defining them as ungrateful and authoritarian. The same stereotypes about Jonglei authorities that fueled the conflict over the relocation seemed to be now confirmed in the article. But first and foremost Isabella saw the article as a transgression of the existing code of conduct.

According to her, the words of the governor (as quoted in the article) were not just threatening a particular organization, but the most important pillars of the aid industry, that is, neutrality and *nongovernmentality*. Again, the two qualities were made inseparable, and were referred to as part of one phenomenon. In this context they were perceived as a sort of immunity, lifting aid workers out of the local social stratification. But contrary to Isabella's expectations, Wanda was reluctant to do anything. Instead, she suggested answering the concerns of the government and the journalist. She proposed working on bettering relations with the government and organizing informational meetings with the authorities and general public to talk about the work done by the INGOs. Her reaction was not the one expected by Isabella. Eventually, she left the Polish compound without agreeing on what (if anything) should be done. In time, emotions cooled down and the whole issue was soon forgotten.

Easter turned out to be calm and relaxing, and no action was ever taken against foreign NGOs. Also, no action was ever taken by the aid workers to address the article. Still, the conflict over the article's content showcases very well the friction between the INGOs and the state. It also illuminates how these problems are linked to the idea of neutrality: the power it holds in the aid industry, and the specific meaning that makes it a structural, rather than ethical concept. For aid workers such as Isabella, neutrality is the prerogative of the aid community. It is perceived as an inalienable right rather than an ethical, radical choice made in times of crisis. Consequently, neutrality continues to be perceived as the main pillar of the industry, even in the face of realities such as those of Bor, which do not easily fit into the category of either humanitarian or development spaces. Linked inextricably with another powerful concept shaping the aid industry—*nongovernmentality*—neutrality becomes perceived as a sort of immunity providing aid workers with protection and exemption from social stratification. Unlike the active version of neutrality described by Redfield (2006), which requires active choices about the role aid work-

ers want to play in given crises, this structural version of neutrality is passive. It is built and validated on the existing topographies of power that describe states, in particular African states and their leaders, as oppressive rulers.

Wanda's attempt to challenge this prevailing narrative visibly annoyed other expatriates. Her unwillingness to subscribe to notions that describe the world through the binary opposition of state versus nonstate, INGOs versus authorities, came as a surprise. For Isabella, Wanda seemed to be a naïve rookie aid worker who understood little about the world of foreign aid. But in fact, Wanda's stance was carefully thought through and resulted from her previous professional experiences. Before taking a job in South Sudan, Wanda was employed by a state institution. In Poland she was considered a "state bureaucrat" and was often depicted as a villain (on state-nonstate conflict in Poland, see Drążkiewicz 2016). She frequently experienced the presumptions made by NGOs about their state counterparts and felt them to be damaging and unfair. She understood firsthand how crucial it is to build a trusting relationship between NGOs and the state administration in order to accomplish any social change. Now, in Bor, even though she was working on the "other side" in a completely different country, dealing with different issues, she recognized the old patterns of behavior far too well, and she did not want to contribute to the reproduction of such a negative structural relationship. That is why, when Stefan and Isabella used neutrality as an argument to support their stance, she had difficulties in subscribing to the notion. Although what was happening in Bor was strikingly similar to what she had known in Warsaw, Wanda noted that, in Warsaw, no one could claim "neutrality," since the term is reserved for conflict zones: instead they talk about being "apolitical," while in fact both in Jonglei and in Poland they are just antistate.

The conflict over the newspaper article shows how the neutrality paradigm is considered not just an antipolitical stance (Ferguson 1994), but also an antistructural position that lifts stake-

holders out of social obligations. As the cases described above reveal, such a stance might validate some states' complaints about foreign agents infiltrating their societies as a destabilizing force. While the act of separation is conducted by aid workers in the name of neutrality, this motivation remains unclear for the local authorities. What they see is simply lack of accountability. Coupled with the aggressive visibility strategies of donors, and their exclusive lifestyles, this specific version of neutrality risks generating conflicts rather than limiting them. For the local authorities who already struggle to maintain control over services that should be in their domain, the attitude of foreign organizations suggesting their entitlement to social immunity does not go unnoticed.

Final comments

As the evidence from Jonglei suggests, today neutrality has more than a single meaning. As Mark Duffield, Joanna Macrae, and Devon Curtis (2001) have pointed out, humanitarian assistance, with its emphasis on neutrality and independence, cannot fill the void of effective political engagement. The growing complexity of aid requires aid workers to adjust their stance on humanitarian principles and to find new ways of being in the world. But the evidence presented here suggests that many humanitarian developers still choose to maintain paradigms designed in very different times and for dealing with different realities. As the humanitarian and development worlds converge, so do their main characteristics. The neutrality of humanitarians and the *nongovernmentality* of development NGOs thus become wedded to each other. This new positioning of neutrality impacts upon the meaning of the concept, and the ways in which it is applied. Instead of the original utilitarian and pragmatic tool that allowed aid workers to avoid "taking sides," this new variation of neutrality is understood as a way of being *beyond* existing sides. Such a framing allows organizations to escape accountabil-

ity to local state structures, but at the same time to remain accountable to donors in Europe and North America, where the issue of neutrality is still treated as a virtue (which explains the involved reaction of the Warsaw headquarters of the Polish NGO to an article in a South Sudanese newspaper).

Paradoxically, in spite of the dominant participatory approach to development, humanitarian developers described in this article use it to refrain from close cooperation with the government (as we saw in the case of relocation), or to reject its particular requests for accountability (such as those verbalized on Women's Day). Ultimately, neutrality becomes associated with social immunity. As we saw in the case of the INGO relocation, by applying this new paradigm uncritically, aid workers risked becoming antidevelopmental in their actions: the compound of the NGO that was ignoring relocation pressures was obstructing development work in the city center. Furthermore, such an approach can be seen as contradictory to participatory approach. As the case of Women's Day reveals, the new neutrality paradigm enables aid providers to dismiss local authorities' wishes, and to treat them as manifestations of unjustified power rather than a way to exercise self-determination and ownership over local development. Ultimately, it distances INGOs from their ideal of development *collaboration* and brings them closer to the charity model of operating, where people are expected to remain passive and grateful. Yet the questioning of this specific variant of neutrality becomes particularly difficult: while it is used in the new world of humanitarian developmentalism and gains new meaning, it still holds the old power of ethical humanitarianism, allowing aid workers to claim higher moral standards. Moreover, as in this new context neutrality is no longer simply a tool, an operational approach, but instead becomes a sort of identity, its abundance and criticism provoke defensive reactions, suggesting that this new approach might be here to stay, regardless whether it is productive or not.

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Notes

1. In an effort to protect the identities of my informants and their organizations, especially amid the ongoing violent conflicts in South Sudan, I have changed the names of my informants, and also intentionally limited descriptions of the NGOs and their activities.
2. My presence in South Sudan was linked to the research I was conducting on Polish aid to Africa. I negotiated my access to the first Polish permanent aid office in Sudan, and conducted extensive participant observation there by agreeing to contribute to its work and become its unpaid administrative officer. I stayed with the organization for seven months, and in that time I could closely observe how the events described in this article unfolded. I discussed their meanings with their participants in numerous conversations and interviews, in which my research partners had a chance to reflect upon the realities they observed and shaped on the ground.

3. Since 1990, Garang's leadership was questioned. This led to the 1991 split within the SPLA and the establishment of the SPLA-Nasir faction, led by Riek Machar. The region was caught up not only in the war with the government in Khartoum, but also in South-on-South violence. In October and November 1991, Nuer forces drove into Bor Dinka country, Garang's homeland, brutally killing hundreds of civilians in Bor and committing violent atrocities in Kongor. Up to 70 percent of the population was displaced. Those who remained in the area faced famine, as most of their livestock had been stolen or slaughtered. The events became known as the Bor Massacre. In March 1993, the mainstream SPLA, under the command of Kuol Manyang Juk, attacked Kongor and succeeded in driving out the SPLA-Nasir forces. Reportedly between sixty and eighty-one people, the majority of them civilians, were killed during the fighting. To this date the events of the early 1990s constitute an important part in the commemorative history of the South Sudanese people and continue to influence the public perception of those who, like Manyang or Machar, participated in them (Hutchinson 2001; Human Rights Watch 1994).
4. This antimilitary attitude was also visible in the employment preferences of foreign NGOs. Some expatriates were not willing to hire people who openly admitted their military background.
5. The resistance to cooperating with the state was also visible in other domains, for instance, taxation. When GOSS started to execute personal income tax, some expatriates expressed suspicion toward the scheme and were considering avoiding the responsibility to pay contributions for their local staff.

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