



The Uncertainties of Aid Work: Development Workers as Mobile Professionals

Summary

This briefing explores the nature of aid work as labour, as well as the effects of mobility on international development professionals. A key finding is that the reality of aid workers as social actors, and the moral and practical dilemmas and tensions they experience is obscured by a compartmentalizing of aid givers and aid recipients into separate categories through a consistent foregrounding of ‘the world’s poor’ in development studies. The data also indicates that more attention needs to be given to the effects of high mobility on employees work practices and personal lives. It raises questions about the rationales for constant relocation, and the importance accorded to knowledge of local cultures for aid delivery. The briefing concludes that the establishment of an international professional association would help address these issues.



Going to work at the provincial hospital



Development Workers as Mobile Professionals

The profession of the overseas aid worker has long had considerable, if ambivalent resonance in the public imagination. It evokes images of selfless individuals working in poor countries, but is also associated with lavish and sometimes unaccountable spending of taxpayers' money. In spite of the continuing relevance of these issues, the profession of aid workers has rarely been studied. This project studied aid workers using an ethnographic approach, with the objective of contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of development processes.

The project aims were to consider aid workers as moral beings, and examine the role played by altruism and professionalism, including the moral dilemmas they are faced with. Further, it recognised aid workers as mobile professionals, and examined the relevance of mobility for their working and social lives. Finally, through viewing aid workers as social actors, the project investigated the relevance of intercultural relations between different actors in the aid sector.

This project was carried out using qualitative, ethnographic research methods, including multi-sited fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Research was conducted during a series of fieldtrips to Cambodia between 2007 and 2011, both urban and rural areas, and in the UK. The findings are based, among other data, on 54 semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with a wider range of individuals. Interviewees' nationalities included Europeans, North Americans and Australians and Cambodians; their age ranged from 21 to over 70 years old, and numbers were nearly equally divided between genders.

Maintaining a comfort zone

Simon was employed by a local mental health NGO in Cambodia and had previously spent six months in Liberia, in the aftermath of the civil war there. He explained how important a work-life balance was in order to be able to do the work: *'it was my first time working overseas, and my life was not separated from my work at all; I had Liberians and their issues, their traumas, around me all the time. I didn't have anything to do with other foreigners, I had to negotiate with locals all the time. It was totally exhausting, and I nearly caved in before the six months were over. After that, I knew I couldn't do it like this again. I need my comfort zones to function. That means, I need my own flat to go home to at the end of the day; that means hanging out with people who speak my own language or English; to create a distance, an emotional comfort zone. Otherwise I wouldn't survive here long'*.

Aid Work as Labour: Between Altruism and Professionalism

While the effects of stress and trauma are commonly discussed in relation to humanitarian and emergency relief workers, this has not been the case with long-term development workers. The project findings suggest that while the stresses these workers face are less obviously dramatic, they are an inherent and pervasive feature of their lives, and may lead to burn-out, leaving the aid sector altogether, and have negative repercussions on their health and personal lives. Adopting a framework that considers aid work as a form of labour enables, in the first instance, the recognition of the everyday tensions and frustrations that characterise much development work.

It would be useful to establish more open debates on the roles of altruism and professionalism in aid work. Work on this topic in comparable disciplines, such as nursing or social work, has produced research and initiatives aimed at improving staff recruitment and retention amongst other outcomes. An exclusive emphasis on 'aid recipients' has hindered more systematic discussions on a range of such issues concerning 'aid givers'. While popular representations of

international aid workers often cast them as selfless actors or, in contrast, castigate them for selfishly benefiting from the aid system, this project found that many are motivated by a combination of professional and personal interests and values.

Although there exists an established field of 'development ethics', these debates have neglected to address the moral dimensions of aid workers' lifestyles, and the fact that 'poverty specialists' may be 'doing well out of poverty' (Kanbur 2010), that is, experiencing relatively comfortably lifestyles, especially in comparison to local populations. This is also felt to be problematic by some aid agencies and their employees themselves. This research found a complex picture, which suggests that many aid workers experience moments of unease with regard to these issues, and respond to them in a variety of ways. Many aid workers were insistent that they were having a good life, independent of their professional status, benefits, or income. This is borne out by their everyday practices, insofar as they are engaged in crafting lifestyles which combined their professional with personal, social and emotional interests and needs. The intertwining of altruistic and professional motives is not only significant in what it

tells us about aid workers, but reveals a lacuna in development ethics. This is the failure – or refusal – to consider the ‘care for self’ as well as the ‘care for the other’. Overcoming the division of ‘aid recipients’ and ‘aid givers’ into separate categories, together with an emphasis on individual rather than only collective moral responsibilities, would thus enable less emotive and more measured debates on the role of altruism and professionalism among aid workers.

Mobility and its Consequences

Overseas aid work is by definition a sector characterised by high levels of mobility. Aid workers frequently change projects or locations. Since many posts are either limited in time, or subject to a rotation policy, people often move between countries and organisations. Rarely, however, have aid workers been considered as labour migrants, and the implications this has for work practices and social lives have not been given full consideration. Both the rationales for, and the effects of these relocations need to be given proper consideration and perhaps review, especially in light of the experiences of aid workers who feel that their professional efficiency and personal wellbeing are compromised by such mobility.

High mobility affects international development workers’ interactions



Making a social call at an orphanage

with their national counterparts negatively. Development workers are not routinely provided with pre-departure or in-country training, focusing on local cultures, language, and social practices, even though this is often offered to volunteers. Consequently, relevant knowledge may be passed on informally by new colleagues or those who have lived locally for a longer time period, but often it is left to newcomers to seek this out themselves. It would be helpful if such training was also provided to those professionals who would benefit from it.

The mobility of aid work also has complex effects on gender equality among aid workers. On the one hand, the sector, with its flexible working practices, offers

opportunities for increased gender equality through enabling dual-career households, accompanying male spouses, and partners taking turns in being lead migrants. At the same time, aid workers’ mobilities cannot be understood as simply overcoming gender inequalities. As transience and separation puts strains on intimate relationships, the data indicates that this could disproportionately affect women, who might be more likely to suspend a career which reduces their opportunities for maintaining a relationship or starting a family, although further research is needed to corroborate this.

Finally, in terms of life course, the project found that contrary to popular notions of aid workers as ‘misfits’ who attempt a radical rupture with life in their home countries, their choices and practices are more usefully understood in the context of their overall life course. This includes the conditions of the labour market in their home countries, as well as their motivations for, and problems associated with a potential return. The most prominent issue here is aid workers’ ‘overseas CV’, referring to a skill set suited to overseas work, which makes it difficult and sometimes undesirable for them to seek work in domestic labour markets.

Mobility and a dual career household

Margaret, a Danish woman in her thirties, had been working for the UN in the Middle East and Africa before taking up a post in Cambodia. Her Dutch husband, who had worked in the aid sector, accompanied her to Cambodia, and after a few months was able to secure a post with an international aid agency in Phnom Penh. Their dual career household is not unusual; however, it is crucially enabled by their domestic staff, as Margaret explains: *‘We were lucky as we are both able to work here in Cambodia; however it helped that my husband had previous relevant work experience. Our lives wouldn’t be possible without help from the people who work for us in the household, someone to look after our little daughter, and a lady who cooks and cleans. We couldn’t live like this so easily in Europe’.*

Policy Implications

There are a number of organizational and structural interventions that could be devised by governmental and non-governmental agencies which employ international development workers, to enable these workers to achieve better working practices and improve wellbeing, and thus ultimately improve the delivery of aid projects.

■ Focus on Development Workers' Wellbeing

While the need for debriefing after stressful or traumatic situations has been recognised for humanitarian relief workers, this is much less the case for those working in long-term international development. This research has found that stress among these aid workers is often considerable, though more likely to be caused by an everyday challenging work environment, aid bureaucracies, and the broader contradictions and frustrations that are inherent in the aid sector. Good management practice to counteract these is essential, but where these fall short, measures such as regular debriefings and supervisions by independent advisors might be useful.

■ The Role of Relocation and Mobility

Even though the aid sector is characterized by highly mobile work practices, their rationales and effects have not been sufficiently acknowledged. It would be advisable to review agencies' relocation policies and practices, and the consequences these have for aid delivery. Specific attention needs to be paid to the impact of voluntary versus mandatory relocation; possibilities for

starting or maintaining families; to the fact that work continuity requires country-specific preparation and understanding; and to issues of re-integration of former aid workers into national labour markets. If aid agencies were prepared to be flexible about mobility, institutional and contextual knowledge could be conserved, as well as life stage requirements of workers.

■ A Professional Association of Aid Workers?

There is some support for the suggestion of establishing a professional association of aid workers. While initiatives aimed at 'professionalisation' of the sector are underway, such an association would identify collective interests in relation to welfare, advocacy, and facilitate global information sharing of experiences or work practices. Although the diversity of aid workers and their respective institutional loyalties might constitute obstacles, the introduction of for example an ombudsman, or the possibility of joining trade unions, might be valid proposals. A related initiative would be the introduction of a sector-wide 'ethics code'. While most organisations

have a code of conduct, an 'ethics code' would identify duties of care on the side of the employer, which becomes important especially with the increasing use of outsourcing and short-term contracts.

How to contact us

This policy briefing was written by Anne-Meike Fechter and is one of the outputs of a ESRC-funded research project entitled 'At Home in 'Aidland'? Development Workers as Mobile Professionals'. For further information on this research please contact Anne-Meike Fechter, Department of Anthropology, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ, UK.

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