

A Thematic Analysis of Humanitarian Aid in post-Soviet Countries: Accessing Aid in Terms of Aid as Work and Development People and Relationships

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Abstract

The theme of relationship and aid as work has often been situated within the discourses of the ethnography of development. The aid as work concept sheds light on how hierarchies of power and knowledge are reproduced through the knowledge practices of humanitarian workers in the field. According to the application of this concept that aims to provide critical analysis of humanitarian aid in post-Soviet countries from the perspective of aid workers through ethnography.

Keywords

Humanitarian Aid; Post-Soviet Countries; Ethnography; HIV; AIDS.

1. Introduction

Following the dismantling of the Soviet Bloc at the end of the Cold War, an overarching objective of Westerns in ex-Soviet countries was to prevent the return of communism in the region, amidst increasing discourses concerning 'good governance.' In the immediate post-Cold War years, development agencies became very intentional about dismantling the state structures linked with the Soviet era, although they did not necessarily have any feasible alternatives in place. It is within this context that Atlani-Duault (2007) critically analyses the inherent tensions between Western and Soviet development models.

Atlani-Duault (2007) charts the role of participating development agencies in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus involved in HIV prevention activities, and questions their belief in the role of local non-governmental organisations (NGO), as alternatives to the state. For the author, this thinking forms part of an overarching institutional ideology since the 1990s, that is based on the objective of counteracting state power as a means of ensuring the success of political and economic liberalism in the post-Cold War context (Atlani-Duault, 2007). Atlani-Duault's (2007) Humanitarian Aid in post-Soviet Countries sheds light on the erroneous assumptions held by development agencies concerning the purported role of local NGOs as alternatives to the state, without any consideration of the repercussions of this ideology which revolved around dismantling the state. Atlani-Duault's critical analysis is reflective of the insider ethnographic approach to the research, which draws from the critical anthropology of development. Proponents of the critical anthropology of development offer a critical analysis of the implementation of development projects as well as the epistemological frameworks that underpin them. The objective is to gain a nuanced understanding of the ways in which the world of development is socially constructed (Escobar, 1996), and how, in turn, subjects are constructed. By adopting such an approach, Atlani-Duault is able to interrogate the political implications of the actions of humanitarian workers in the field. By analysing dominant development discourses, in which development is conceptualised mostly in terms of Western capitalism, and analysed in binary terms whereas the North is the epitome of development and the South requires 'catching up,' I will explore the role of humanitarian workers as brokers of

development by criticising the phenomenon of expertise. I will analyse Atlani-Duault's concept of 'networked developmental configuration' to further reflect on relationships, specifically, cross-cultural cooperation in relation to the theme of development people and relationship. Firstly, I will outline the theoretical background of relationship and aid as work, which will form the underpinning framework for my analysis of cross-cultural cooperation and humanitarian expertise. Within the context of dominant development discourses, this essay will argue that it is imperative for development experts to adopt a flexible posture and adapt to local contexts and espouse the imperative of being self-reflective and adopting flexible policies that are based on a recognition of the specificities of the local context. Therefore, a cultural gap exists between western and local actors and thus which intend to examine how cross-cultural local government/NGO cooperation can be achieved to ensure that the participation of both international agencies and local governments is equal and effective due to the fact that practical experience is relevant for ensuring aid delivery.

2. Methodology of Ethnographer

2.1. Research Design

The methodological underpinnings of Atlani-Duault's (2007) work is based on a networked ethnography. The idea of a networked ethnography is imperative because the research subjects of the study are not easily compartmentalised into simplistic dichotomies of local communities on one hand, and Western institutions on the other. The approach is predicated on the assumption that "in reality, development situations are 'interfaces' not only between field actors, but also between the institutions they represent (some of them multinational) and the representation systems that influence them" (Atlani-Duault, 2007, p.5), The methodology adopted in the study is also predicated on critical analysis which enables an in-depth understanding of the research topic, and enables a critical understanding of development policies and their implications. Furthermore, she participated this aid activity as both researcher and observer which means that it is easier for her to establish network with each aid worker of IDO and local actor and progress researching activities.

2.2. Methods

This methodology is underpinned by linkages between three theoretical approaches (De Sardan, 1995), the first of which is based on promoting local knowledge or the knowledge of the people, which is often conceptualised as an idealised entity (De Sardan, 1995). This ideology is encapsulated in the work of Robert Chambers in his work "Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last (1997), which is based on promoting "small projects versus large ones, appropriate technology versus heavy technology, subsistence culture versus exported cultures, peasant logic and knowledge versus scientific logic and knowledge, rural versus urban, small farmers versus rural entrepreneurs, . . . peasant organizations versus big projects" (De Sardan, 1995, p.479).

The second theoretical framework that influences the methodology pertains to discourses on alternative approaches to development as promoted by scholars such as Escobar (2000), who criticise mainstream development approaches as being mainly driven by the quest to achieve economic and industrial growth according to the principles of Western capitalism. The argument put forward by Escobar and proponents of this view, is that development is conceptualised as occurring on a linear scale of progression whereby the North is viewed as leading the process whereas the South requires 'catching up' because it is limited by a regressive traditionalism that can only be overturned through capitalism and modern industrial technology. The neo-colonialist undercurrents of this ideology is particularly questioned. The third theoretical assumptions that informs the methodology applied is

predicated on moving away from “the simplistic over-valuing of folk knowledge and knee-jerk criticism of the ‘development business’, as well as the over-simple logic of domination versus resistance” (Atlani-Duault, 2007, p.5). In this perspective, the focus is shifted towards development workers as veritable subjects for fieldwork (Mosse, 2005) as opposed to traditional conceptualisations of “development as an external force acting on ‘real’ ethnological field subjects” (Atlani-Duault, 2007, p.5).

The study employs several methods that are a hallmark of its anthropological and ethnographic influence. This includes interviews, informal conversations, cross-cultural cooperation with research subjects as well as participant observation. I argue that a series of questions inherently arise with respect to the use of these methods. For instance, regarding the use of participant observation, to what extent is the researcher able to maintain objectivity? To what extent is objectivity maintained through interpretations of the research phenomena? In response to these questions, a general answer would be that the work of the researcher is guided by constructivist epistemological assumptions, in which meaning is given to things in terms of how the social world is constructed by people through their subjective interpretations and actions. Thus, it is imperative to underscore that in such qualitative studies, what the researcher knows “is inseparable from their relationship with those they study – the epistemology is relational – but...writing breaks fieldwork relations, cuts the network, and erects boundaries: it is necessarily anti-social” (Mosse, 2006, p.935; Heath and Street, 2008; Walford, 2008). Qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with “what people believe, say, and do (and the inconsistencies between these) to the inter-connected institutions that comprise the modern world, to policy and professional communities of which they may also be members, their method of entering and exiting social worlds becomes more difficult” (Mosse, 2006, p. 935).

3. Background

The theme of relationship and aid as work has often been situated within the discourses of the anthropology of development. Over the years, anthropologists have become increasingly critical about development and erroneous dichotomies between ‘world ordering knowledge’ and indigenous knowledge, which has been increasingly conceptualised as incompatible with the realities of development encounters (Stirrat, 2000). The discourse has increasingly shifted towards the border-crossing workers at the frontline in development and the ways in which power is enshrined in global policies and frameworks that instigate global transformations under a broad ‘good governance’ agenda (Hazenbergh, 2016); these policies and frameworks are argued to be influenced by various social contexts. For example, scholars have focused on the ways in which the social relations that govern expert communities are translated into the various interests of institutions as well as into local politics, with various implications and unintended effects (Stirrat, 2000). Professional identities in development and the ways in which they seek to instigate technical and social change through policy ideas underpinned by global knowledge, is particularly interrogated. This global knowledge is produced by international organisations thus the extent to which local knowledge is dismissed is problematized along with questions about how hierarchies of power and knowledge are reproduced through knowledge practices (Long, 2001). It is argued that the majority of development agencies are based in the West and further, they embody a long history of Western intervention in other parts of the world. To achieve a nuanced overview of the development business, it is imperative to situate the activities of these actors within these historical contexts, and within the extensive historical process concerning relations between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’” (Stirrat, 2000).

Along these lines and in the context of the debate on power relations and power dynamics, anthropological approaches have in recent years, questioned the impact of colonialism in informing the creation of knowledge about the colonial world. Scholars have built upon the work of Foucault to demonstrate how conceptualisations of the developing world are largely based on the epistemological assumptions held by the West, who in turn, prescribe the ways in which development should work based on these same epistemological assumptions. By focusing on humanitarian workers and development professionals themselves, the ways in which “homogenized development policy knowledge has its social basis in the locally transient but internationally permanent and close-knit communities of experts whose reach, intensity and centralization is increased by electronic information and communication technologies” (Stirrat, 2000, p.32) is better understood. More importantly, the extent to which policy is constructed based on political, social and economic governance relationships is brought to the forefront. It has been argued by scholars such as Woods (2006) that the combination of internationalisation and formalism in the development field has fostered the increasingly technicalization of development policy, thus creating a centralised pool of expertise which inherently promotes a certain class of experts at the national level. The argument here is that the “linking of formalism and ‘delegation downwards’ extends (quasi-) formal modelling from national economies to the intimate spaces of communities, bringing new interest in re-engineering institutions and state- citizen relations by changing incentive structures, modifying rules, introducing new forums for accountability or conflict resolution, or local competitive bidding for resources” (Stirrat, 2000, p.32). By enabling nuanced insight into how the creation of expert communities at both the national and global level operation, an aid as work approach enables a better conceptualisation of aid approaches and how they are constructed. I will use this theme of aid as work to analyse Atlani-Duault’s (2007) work, which sheds light on IDO’s attempt to promote the hegemonic good governance agenda at the time of the author’s writing.

4. Critical analysis of Humanitarian Aid in Post-Soviet Countries

This attempt to instil ‘good governance’ in the local context is fraught with various problems, despite the standpoint of IDO which was based on the assumption that it was viable project in terms of the linkages between humanitarianism and state-building as a pathway for promoting development and social order. The argument here firstly, is the fact that the concept of good governance is predicated on Western ideals about liberal democracies with little regard for local principles, contexts and knowledge (Hazenbergh, 2016). It is further argued that a context-specific approach is required in humanitarian contexts, whereby development experts should grapple with the local context in terms of: gaining a nuanced outlook of the historical trajectory of state formation in the local setting; understanding the key drivers of marginalisation, poverty and conflict; understanding the dialectics between the economic and political processes of the state; considering state-society relations; focusing on the state legitimacy and the basis for this legitimacy as well as understanding local/informal avenues for distributing rights and resources, and for conflict resolution. It is important that these experts analyse local power relations and their implications for shaping economic and political behaviour.

While IDO sought to assist the local government to establish good governance, in many ways, western so-called expertise may not be able to achieve such an objective due to a myriad of reasons that can be understood via the theme of aid as work in the sense that: humanitarian aid was highly globalised through the various multiple actors whose priorities, perceptions and approaches to work were developed in various cultural contexts. The convergence of various cultural influences, which were formed in distinct contexts, compromised the effectiveness of interventions as strategies were globalised and not culturally embedded in the local context (Johnson et al., 2016). As a caveat, expertise was required to address the HIV situation however

this expertise was inadequate in terms of its local knowledge. Thus for example in negotiating assistance in chapter 3, a myriad of fancy strategies were employed that did not really address the realities on the ground. I argue that too often, development has been inclined to focus on technical assistance solely, with little consideration for the local enabling or disabling environment, although this is changing. A corollary of this approach is the fact that several development programmes have been unable to achieve their desired outcomes. Local processes and the politics and power relations as well as informal institutions that underpin them, work greatly to impinge on development interventions. Thus they must be incorporated into development strategies as opposed to highly stylized approaches favoured by IDO.

IDO failed to fully understand the extent to which bureaucratic practices can create social order and this can be linked to the wider inability of humanitarian regimes to understand why their projects have often failed to have desired geopolitical outcomes. There was a clear gap between IDO's vision for development and local conceptualisations of it. The bureaucratization of international development agencies and the stylized forms of policies and strategies were not functional and were devoid of targeted measures that could effectively address the specificities of the local context. Thus, Western expertise is arguably myopic and it is imperative that international development agencies practice a huge degree of self-reflection, in addition to more flexible policies and strategies that take into context local nuances and specificities.

I will also focus on the theme of development people and relationship that Atlani-Duault's (2007) work presented the cross-cultural cooperation between IDO and local NGOs. In the development space, the language of partnership and cooperation has often buttressed policy relationships between a myriad of actors: between states and NGOs and between private sector actors and government. Indeed, the notion that "aid is a matter of relationships" (Eyben, 2006) and that aid is more effective when development agencies promote relationship-building skills (Andrews, 2009) has increasingly become evident, although it has been counter-argued by Eyben (2006, p.231) that "proposing that a bureaucratic organisation equip its staff with relationship skills is contrary to the ethos of an organisation that looks for controlling, emotionless, objective patterns of behaviour in which time spent with other people can only be justified by a cost-benefit analysis"—a dynamic that is viewed as the "challenge facing those wanting relationships to work in aid" (Eyben, 2006, p.231). In development policy, a three-sector model comprising public, private and non-governmental (also known as third) sectors, is integral; these actors are invariably linked in various ways through not only personal relationships but also in terms of resource flows as well as informal transactions (Lewis, 2008). Amidst societal changes in the West following the onset of global capitalist networks of information and power (Castells, 1997), organisational theorists have been increasingly concerned about how bureaucracies have been reconfigured in response to the advent of the information age.

More so than ever, the boundaries between organisations have become increasingly blurred, signalling a greater deal of interdependence between them (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). It has been suggested that "sector boundaries are likely to be more complex, subtle and unstable in 'real life' than a basic three-sector model allows. For example, 'non-governmental' actors are linked in potentially important ways to the other sectors via people, resource flows and transactions, although such links are often far from visible. They may include kinship relations within elite families, age sets or alumni groups which connect NGO staff with colleagues in other spheres, the social embeddedness of employees within wider communities, and public or private funding streams that create ambiguous roles, allegiances and identities among 'non-governmental' actors" (Lewis, 2008, p.126). The promotion of such a relational approach in development policy, as I have previously argued, stems from wider social changes that encapsulate not only globalisation, but also, other factors such as changing gender relations in the workplace and an increasingly networked society. I argue that it is imperative to promote

cross-cultural relations between local government and NGOs, particularly because of the way in which certain development principles are viewed between non-Western and Western cultures. While in part, the legitimacy of NGOs is predicated on their comparative advantage of their closeness to local communities and grassroots organisations, as well as their cultural sensitivity towards local groups, which is applied to so-called culturally-sensitive interventions, this is not often the case as Atlani-Duault's (2007) work depicted that the ethnography presented the conversation, negotiation even conflicts between IDO and local actors due to cultural difference and technological gap. The manner in which knowledge, strategies and technologies are transferred from one country to another may be fraught with problems due to the fact that they may not consider cross-cultural implications. Further the way in which social order and change should be managed in certain communities may be completely different from prescribed Western methods. For example, participatory decision making processes developed under individualistic frameworks in Western societies may diverge from the community-based approaches favoured in some cultures.

I also argue that values and notions of ethicality differ considerably across various cultures, and this has implications for gender and power relations, and relationships more generally; because of this, it is important for cross-cultural nuances and sensitivities to be developed. In this ethnography, aid workers of IDO have tried to implant understanding of diverse culture and suggested local actors to pay more attention to minorities such as homosexual, prostitute and drug user while the reverberation of local actors is furious protest due to ideology, political system and cultural difference. I suggest that a co-participatory and reflexive approach in line with alternative paradigms of development, which generally promote a people-centred and participatory approach (Pieterse, 1998). This is particularly important due to the observation that a fundamental change has occurred in the modern history of development in the sense that agency has become more important. Development now draws extensively from the subjectivity of people as opposed to state institutions and structures or the workings of international bodies such as the World Bank or the United Nations. To a large extent, there has been a paradigmatic shift towards local actors in development (Pieterse, 1998, p. 369). It is imperative that reflexive practice is adopted within development agencies, to promote the constant questioning of development policy from within. I also argue, that in both local and international NGOs, it is important to implement capacity building initiatives that are underpinned by robust empirical research governed by cross-cultural principles.

5. Discussion

Based on the analysis above, I argue that the researcher should be placed at the center of an analysis concerning the knowledge produced through social research, whereby the research achieves reflexive awareness of his/her role as a knowledge producer. Reflexive awareness is also required to raise acknowledgement of the notion of research as a product of various interlinking cross-cultural relationships and identities. This requires experts to have contextually specific ideas concerning what works in real world contexts, and what doesn't. There is the notion that qualitative research such as ethnography is inherently a recursive and reflective process (Ely et al., 1991) however the analysis above demonstrates the imperative of improved self-reflection in order to improve the ability of properly evaluating the quality of aid activities. Improved reflexivity in ethnography will shed light on the "ideological and historical power dominant forms of inquiry exerted over the researcher and the researched" (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998, p.142).

This degree of self-reflection is integral to the fulfilment of research agendas since the process of reflexivity is based on the quest "to identify, do something about, and acknowledge the limitations of the research: its location, its subjects, its process, its theoretical context, its data,

its analysis, and how accounts recognize that the construction of knowledge takes place in the world and not apart from it. ... For us, being reflexive in doing research is part of being honest and ethically mature in research practice that requires researchers to "stop being "shamans" of objectivity" (Ruby, 1980, p.154). Further, it is imperative for the cross-cultural implications of development policies and strategies to be considered due to the varying principles and perceptions between Western and non-Western societies; Western prescriptions to development problems are often inadequate for addressing some development challenges which may be highly localized. Experts must be equipped with the right tools to adopt a culturally sensitive outlook on development issues—one that is well aware of the power and gendered relations that shape various societies and by extension, policies. This point is linked to the importance of adopting a reflexive approach in development practice in order to promote the constant and critical questioning of development from within, which will only serve to improve aid delivery approaches. I argue that it is important that in both local and international NGOs, it is important to implement capacity building initiatives that are underpinned by robust empirical research governed by cross-cultural principles. I suggest that the cultural and customary norms and practices of local communities and recipients of humanitarian and development assistance more generally, is a reality that humanitarian workers must grapple with on daily basis in their field of work. For this reason, it is clear that cultural sensitivity and awareness is important not only for the successful provision of international humanitarian assistance, but also for raising important questions about the nexus between such norms and values, and normative frameworks that govern aid delivery—which may be based on principles that conflict with cultural norms and practices. In several cases, mistakes made in international humanitarian aid operations have been caused by a lack of understanding of, and in some cases, a lack of respect for, the local context, particularly local norms, cultures and customs. Thus, this is a critical area that must be addressed.

6. Conclusion

The aid as work concept sheds light on how hierarchies of power and knowledge are reproduced through the knowledge practices of humanitarian workers in the field. By applying this concept, I was able to explore and critically analyze the current policies and structures in development, as well as the weaknesses that are concomitant with them with the view to improve aid delivery. I argued that these strategies that IDO have presented are often underpinned by highly stylized policies that are not functional and that are devoid of the nuances required to address the specificities of local communities. Thus, to a large extent, Western expertise is arguably myopic rendering it imperative for international development agencies to adopt a reflexive approach in addition to more flexible and culturally sensitive policies and strategies that take into context local nuances and specificities. I espouse a co-participatory and reflexive approach to reflect the changes in the development field, whereby development is now mostly rooted in the subjectivity of people as opposed to the traditional top-down strategies whereby international bodies typically spearheaded development initiatives. With development being increasingly geared towards local actors, it is imperative that experts receive the requisite training that will enable them to adopt a more functional approach in such specific contexts. In addition to staff training, it is recommended that the management and supervision of institutions is also reinforced to achieve holistic reforms.

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