Chapter 10

Global Authenticity, Local Authority: Epistemic Power, Discursive Geographies, and the Creation of Civil Society Knowledge Networks

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Introduction

Knowledge is both the fuel and the product of international development practice. Development interventions are premised on knowledge and ideas—both on understandings of the needs of the majority world (the nature of the problem), and on ideas of how to engage with and ultimately resolve such needs (how to solve it). At the same time, this process inevitably creates new knowledge in its wake, both among those who work in the development sector, and those whom the sector attempts to help. This is an iterative, interconnected process that is embedded in wider epistemic currents and world views (Verkoren, 2010). Out of it arise the paradigms and ideas that have come and gone in development practice—from micro-credit to cash transfers, from women in development to gender mainstreaming, from resilience to adaptation. This chapter is concerned with the question of knowledge sources in development practice—how do ideas and knowledge currents (and the people that represent them) find ascendancy within development practice, both among global epistemic currents and their field-applications? How do development actors, particularly development-focused civil society organizations, prioritize and legitimize certain ideas? Why do such organizations select, accept, and choose to apply certain ideas over others?

To answer these questions, it is crucial to look at the way development practitioners *themselves* understand, categorize, and utilize ideas and knowledge sources. This chapter will use two multi-sited studies of *aidland* (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Marcus, 1995; Mosse, 2011) to demonstrate the ways in which development professionals repeatedly create, enact, utilize, and privilege two categories or typologies of knowledge: “expert” or global knowledge and participatory or “local”

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knowledge. Of course, such a binary distinction between expert and local is not normative but descriptive. While it has been contested in the academic literature,¹ this chapter will demonstrate that it continues to be used in development practice; hence the logic behind its use must be described and understood. I argue that both categories are used in international development to give practitioners legitimacy to act, and yet that each also plays a separate role in development projects: referencing expert knowledge gives development interventions authority, while laying claim to local knowledge grants authenticity. Thus, both categories carry power. Yet I will argue that this power is more than simply a form of cultural imperialism founded on ideas about the professional, the expert, and expertise (Kothari, 2005, p. 427). This power is used to produce, co-opt, and justify development work rather than only repress or control its subjects—in the words of Lewis and Mosse (2006), it is power “that comes from below as well as above, that is heterogeneous, diffuse, immanent and unstable” (p. 3).

The category of expert knowledge has a long history in development interventions,² as well as in the colonial administrations that were international development’s predecessors.³ It is global in scope and typically Western-based in origin. It is technical in its extent and focus, often concentrating on formalized methodological approaches to problem-solving, be they log frames⁴ or survey instruments. It is rooted in a common language (not only English, but also the particular discourse of international development) and its practitioners bear the insignia of authority, such as Western degrees and international experience (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Mosse, 2011). The individuals and organizations that are the source of this knowledge are part of what Adler, Haas and others have called *epistemic communities* (Adler & Haas, 1992; Haas, 1990)—“a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). These are consultants (and consultancies), foundations, academics, monitoring and evaluation specialists, expats, and *development nomads* (Chambers, 2005) working in the higher rungs of the country offices of transnational development institutions. All share “the will to improve” (Li, 2007, p. 1) under-developed societies as a core aim.

In short, the sources of expert knowledge are the individuals and organizations that act as what John Meyer (1999, 2010) has termed *advisors* in dispensing their expertise to development projects. As will be argued below, expert knowledge is used to give legitimacy and authority to already existing development practice as much as to develop new knowledge and new ideas. It reproduces the epistemic and discursive consensus of transnational movements, and often incorporates academic knowledge or credentials. Expert knowledge has its own spaces of consensus

¹ See Aronsson, 2007; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; McKinnon, 2006; Mitchell, 2002.

² Evans and Stephens, 1988; Ingham, 1993; Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998.

³ Adas, 1989; Cohn, 1996; Said, 1978/1994.

⁴ Log frames, or the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), is used in international development projects as a formalized way of organizing project design and monitoring. It largely consists of drawing and filling in tables with the details of various project objectives and goals.

building, such as conferences, workshops, and trainings—indeed, both knowledge building and knowledge transfer are important goals of such “experts.” In the words of Uma Kothari (2005), “knowledge of development professionals and the Western notions of ‘progress’ embodied within them continue to be reinforced through the power embedded in the relationship between donor and beneficiary” (p. 428).

Yet expert knowledge is not the only source of legitimacy for development practice. Over the course of the last few decades, another form of knowledge in development has become equally vital: local (also known as “citizen,” “grassroots,” “indigenous,” or “traditional”⁵) knowledge (Briggs, 2005). This pushback is intertwined with postmodern perspectives and post-development theory, whose proponents reject development’s universalist aims at global betterment (Escobar, 1995). They privilege and emphasize specificity and context-dependence, and promote “the validity and salience of local knowledge” (Beinart, 2000, p. 277)—for example, emphasizing the value of indigenous conservation systems (Berkes, 1999; Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2000), or culturally specific ways of interpreting gender relations, such as Islamic feminism (Mahmood, 2005). In development practice, such knowledge emerges out of local leaders, participatory rural appraisals, and partnerships with grassroots organizations and activists. The development actors that prize such knowledge understand it to be locally tied and spatially bound (Fernando, 2003), and “time, place and culture specific” (Speranza, Kiteme, Ambenje, Wiesmann, & Makali, 2010, p. 296). The people and institutions that provide such knowledge are as much advisors and harbingers of legitimacy to development practice as the experts, but rather than being part of global epistemic communities and movements, they represent the authentic needs and perspectives of the individuals and communities with whom development civil society hopes to engage. Such “knowledge from below” has come to be increasingly privileged with the rise of participatory approaches to development—indeed, discovering and implementing local knowledge plays an essential role in such approaches (Chambers, 2005; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Beyond granting a different kind of legitimacy to development practice, local knowledge also grants authenticity to global development-focused civil society by seeming to move it out of Western-centred, transnational movements and approaches to the perspectives and desires of the subjects of development.

Development practitioners use both typologies to justify their attempts to represent the “universal” needs and rights of the world’s peoples, and to operate off a widely accepted (but not uncontested) assumption of the moral universality of their values (Anderson & Rieff, 2005). In this work, I not only examine the ways that development-focused civil society uses these two typologies of knowledge to signify legitimacy and authenticity, but also the relationship between the two. Global civil society organizations can invoke both categories simultaneously and at times in contradiction, and this chapter examines the way such organizations navigate

⁵I would echo Sillitoe (2010) in dismissing the semantic debates between these various terms as peripheral to an examination of the subject itself and the role it plays in the valuing and categorizing of knowledge.

such tensions and contradictions. Expert and local knowledge typologies are also used by the very individuals and organizations to whom they are applied, often in savvy, knowing ways in order to access both global funds and opportunities and local trust and cooperation. Yet the distinction between expert and local knowledge is itself blurry and contested, and the individuals and collectives to which such categories are applied often move between the two. Indeed, this chapter subverts these categories by pointing out the difficulties and contradictions in the way development-focused civil society attempts to categorize and demarcate different types of knowledge.

To do so, I draw on data from two multi-sited qualitative case studies of global development organizations and their in-country partners. Fieldwork for these case studies was conducted between 2011 and 2014, and utilised in-depth semistructured interviews (with over 200 interviews conducted in total), many more informal conversations and discussions, textual analysis of the written materials produced by the networks, and participant observation inspired by ethnographic methodology. I spent weeks with each of the organizations, attending meetings, shadowing workers, conducting interviews with as many people in each organization as possible, going out for informal social events, and in many cases actually staying as a guest in the homes of members of these organizations, often for multiple weeks at a time. Often it was the informal interactions that generated far more insight and sparked new questions rather than formal interviews. The interviews themselves consciously incorporated a variety of voices and vantage points across staff positions in the civil society organizations, where I interviewed nearly everyone I could access, allowing for a broad and nuanced picture of the organizations, their cultures, and the ways they created, took up, privileged, and transmitted ideas. When possible, I have conducted multiple rounds of individual interviews with the same key actors.

As this project examines connections and flows via discourse and practice, I have designed its methodological approach to utilize conversations as a window into attitudes, actions, and values. The methodology is thus centred around what Heyl (2001) describes as ethnographic interviewing: emphasizing time, openness, and repeated interactions with participants in order to build rapport and engage the participants in the research process itself. Rather than seeking only specific pieces of information and approaching the interview “as a pipeline for transmitting knowledge” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 3), I approached interviews as a two-sided social encounter, and the knowledge produced by them as emerging out of the interaction between myself as interviewer, the person being interviewed, and any third party such as a translator. Thus, I approached these interviews as moments of mutual meaning making from both interviewer and respondent. In practice, this often meant entering the interview with a preconceived range of topics and questions, and making use of an interview guide for interviews at each tier of the process outlining the thematic areas I wished to cover, but at the same time actively engaging with the content of the interview, challenging answers, asking for depth, allowing the improvisation of new questions, adumbrating new interpretations, or privileging the development of certain topics over others. Such flexibility allows for a depth and

richness of data that is particularly suited to the complexity of mapping such knowledge networks (Beinart, 1991; Wengraf, 2001).

The first of the two case studies encompasses the Christensen Fund (TCF), a US-based foundation working internationally with a mandate of supporting and promoting biocultural diversity (the intersection of biological and cultural diversity, such as the protection of sacred sites or traditional agroecological practices (Loh & Harmon, 2005)). The case study includes their partners in Kenya—Kivulini Trust, a small nonprofit based in Nairobi, and Waso Trustland, and even smaller NGO based in the north Kenyan town of Isiolo. Both organizations were supporting projects connected to biocultural diversity in the pastoral communities of the northern part of the country, and are examined in the context of a forest conservation project that they support in a small village in Isiolo district of Kenya. The second case study is of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), a large implementing foundation⁶ that runs development projects around education, health, natural resource management, and economic development in a number of regions around the globe. The case study looks closely at AKF's work in Kyrgyzstan, drawing data from immersive qualitative fieldwork with its Kyrgyzstan branch (AKF Kg) and local implementing partner NGO (called the Mountain Society Development Support Programme Kyrgyzstan, or MSDSP Kg) in the context of their climate-change adaptation programme.

These two case studies provide insights into two very different organizations and development networks, with different scopes, approaches, and goals, and two different cultural and political contexts for their work. The USA-Kenya network encompasses far smaller organizations, concerned less with mainstream development and more with indigenous and ecological problems, and with much of the connections in the network built on personal relationships and a strong emphasis on empowering local leaders. The Swiss-Kyrgyz network involves larger organizations, which are deeply embedded in the aidland of international development. While these organizations are interested in ecological issues, they are deeply rooted in more mainstream development concerns around livelihood, education, and health. Despite the contrast, both networks create and utilize the two typologies or categories of knowledge discussed above. In this chapter, I draw on aspects and examples from each to examine ways of knowing and of privileging knowledge in development-focused civil society. I argue that civil society organizations create this morphology of knowledge in order to signal authority and authenticity both to others and themselves, thus enacting power. Yet these categories are also fluid and porous, and can at different times be used by the same individuals and organizations. This chapter demonstrates the way these two typologies are simultaneously used, contested, and undermined by both the agents and "beneficiaries" of development. The power their use confers is dynamic and complex, and lies beyond simple hierarchies and top-down interventions—and can thus be captured by multiple agents, in multiple positions of power and resistance, within the development project.

⁶That is, AKF draws on its own internal funding and runs its own projects—though in fact AKF also applies for and uses external funding for its programs.

Creating Authority out of Expert Knowledge

Expert Expats in Bishkek

The Kyrgyzstan office of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF Kg) demonstrates the ways in which development-focused civil society seeks and utilizes expertise and expert knowledge. This expertise is largely Western, though, as described below, its producers prefer to think of themselves as global.⁷ When I visited the organization in 2013, expats held the three top positions in the organization: Karl,⁸ a German, was the CEO; Jack,⁹ a Canadian, was in charge of fundraising and grant-writing; and Nicolle, an American, was the head of the research, monitoring, and evaluation unit. All three are development veterans, having worked for many years in Africa or Asia before coming to AKF Kg. The organization's culture was thus dominated by expat authority, and by the distinction between the expats and locals working in the organization. When I asked Karl how most of decisions, particularly those related to creating programs when applying for new grants, were made, he said that this was done by Jack in conversation with himself and Nicolle. Karl was not the only one to say so: during my interviews, most of the Kyrgyz staff members at AKF Kg stated that Jack created ideas around programming, and there was a strong sense in both AKF Kg and its implementing partner NGO MSDSP that expats and their networks made decisions in Bishkek. This deferral to foreign expertise was also reflected in AKF Kg's climate-change adaptation programming, then a new area for AKF and MSDSP. Another expat (Laurie, an American) was specifically hired as a consultant to refine, evolve, and shape the program's implementation.

These positions are all crucial to the way broad trends and global movements are transformed into AKF programming, and the way the programming is implemented, evaluated, altered, and tailored. The climate-change adaptation program is a case in point: both Karl, then the CEO of AKF Kg, and David, at the time the head of the environmental fund of the Aga Khan Foundation, called the Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan Fund for the Environment (PSAKFE), described the climate-change adaptation program in Kyrgyzstan as pragmatic, and valuable for being able to tap into broader interest (and thus funding) within the global development community. Both credited Laurie with the main idea and impetus behind the program—despite the fact that Talant, the Kyrgyz head of MSDSP, told me that he was one of the program's original instigators. Thus, it is Western experts like Laurie or Jack who are given the task of interpreting the interests and trends of the broader development community into programming in particular countries. This is not to say that their

⁷ Indeed, the very term *global civil society* carries this conceit (Anderson & Rieff, 2005; Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 2003).

⁸ Participants in the case studies were given the option to change their name to preserve anonymity, or to use their real given/first name. Most preferred to use their real given or first name; some chose to have their full name used, and some names have been changed upon request.

⁹ Named changed on request.

motives are purely pragmatic—Laurie is genuinely and deeply concerned with the effects of climate change on communities in the developing world. But such genuine concern does not negate the more pragmatic advantages of creating connections into global movements and consensus that has funding behind it. Wielders of expert knowledge then both adopt norms and create them. Experts become what the sociologist John Meyer refers to as the *consultants* or *others* (i.e., not actors or nation states) who create and enforce a world polity—collectives that take part in and mutually create a world culture, that produce norms and advice by speaking in terms of higher truths and moral laws, such as climate change and its moral imperatives for development (Meyer, 1999).

These experts are able to exercise power and find legitimacy in part by relying on the claim that their knowledge emerges from working in the development sector all over the globe and with a variety of different programs. They are part of a development epistemic community, in the sense of “networks of knowledge-based experts” with “authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge” (Haas, 1992, p. 2–3). Their claims to policy-relevance and professionalism lend them authority, and the internationalization of their knowledge, and their connection to wider development currents—often through conferences, workshops, and international meetings—grants legitimacy by giving a transnational scope to their ideas.

Indeed, this is the corner stone of the epistemic community idea—an international consensus in the applicability and the verity of certain forms of knowledge. Epistemic communities have a shared way of knowing, which includes shared values, causal beliefs, and, importantly, shared discursive practices. In AKF’s in-country branches, connections to epistemic communities in this sense were created and fostered through trainings (discussed below), the hiring of experts, and attendance at conferences. This use of expert knowledge is coordinated by the head office of the Aga Khan Foundation in Geneva, which is the key player in integrating AKF into a global community, advising country branches, creating connections, and following up on funding opportunities. Mark, the head of AKF’s natural resource management (NRM) program in AKF’s head office, told me that the Geneva office’s main function is to “stay in touch with global best practices” and to “engage with international programs”—and to spread these practices through trainings for country office staff and by bringing a handful of staff members from each country to a few international conferences or events every year.

This alignment with broader, transnational ideas and ways of knowledge gives expats in the development arena not only legitimacy but also power. Local staff at both AKF Kg and MSDSP would refer and defer to expat expertise, in particular to Laurie’s role in the climate-change adaptation program. Pirjan, who ran the climate-change adaptation program, Aizada, who was the program coordinator, and Talant, the director of MSDSP—all Kyrgyz staff members at MSDSP—repeatedly mentioned “the international consultant” or “reports prepared by an international consultant” or some fact “according to the international consultant”—although it was clear that I knew Laurie and her role in the program. Mentioning the *international consultant* gave legitimacy and gravitas to whatever fact, argument, or piece of work they were discussing, in a way that mentioning the specific person (Laurie)

who did the work did not. The fact that this power was granted to a consultant, specifically in a knowledge- and advice-giving role, echoes Meyer's (2010) arguments about the role of consultants, advisers, and others (that is, non-actors) in creating consensus and agreement transnationally. At the same time the use of the very word "international" by Kyrgyz staff members denotes a level of authority to the knowledge produced by this figure (and Laurie's role was largely producing knowledge—reports, training manuals, syntheses of village assessments).

Thus, the power to decide on what global movements, organizations, and programs to engage with, as well the power to transform this (initially knowledge-based) engagement into action, lies with the international, and in fact Western, expats in AKF Kg. When I asked local staff members, both at MSDSP and at AKF, whether they had any decision-making power in the selection and design of new programs, they largely agreed that they had ceded it to Mark (together with Nicolle, Karl, and, in the case of the climate-change adaptation program, Laurie). However, they did insist that the programs had to conform to the organization's current strategic plan, and that they had a role in deciding what that plan contained at the two organizations' annual meeting and retreat. Yet even here it is significant that these meetings were attended by Western staff from AKF Geneva, and that the AKF Geneva office had to approve the new strategic plan. In short, even when key decision-making was nominally given to local staff, it was still controlled, and indeed even controlled directly, by the global node of the Kyrgyz network.

Creating Local Experts: Language, Education, and Training Trips in Kyrgyzstan

The weight and authority given to experts is echoed in the background and educations of the local staff members who are allowed to take on powerful roles in AKF Kg and MSDSP. Almost all the staff members of AKF Kg and at MSDSP's head office in Osh are fluent in English, not a common thing even amongst Kyrgyzstan's highly educated. Nicolle once expressed concern that staff hired in Bishkek and Osh are selected on their language abilities rather than their knowledge or skills in development. Many had English Language as their university degree, and AKF Kg tended to prize their ability to connect with expat authorities as well as global partners. Many staff members are sent abroad for trainings, which are inevitably held in English.

Pirjan is one of the few staff members who did not speak English, whose experience and abilities overrode this requirement when he was being hired. On several occasions, Pirjan mentioned to me that he felt disadvantaged by this fact: He found it difficult to communicate with Laurie and to attend joint AKF-MSDSP meetings, and in fact the job advertisement both for his job and for the coordinator of the third iteration of the climate-change adaptation (a job he applied for and did not get) contained an explicit requirement of English fluency.

By contrast, Rahat, the new coordinator for the third iteration of the climate-change adaptation program, has a master's degree from Manchester. Leila, the reporting manager for MSDSP—which is the one position at MSDSP besides that of Talant, the director, that involved communicating with donor organizations outside of Kyrgyzstan—did her master's in Washington, D.C., and worked there for several years. Molvoda, the communications manager at AKF, lived for several years in New York. All three of these staff members are key in the way the intermediaries' actions and ideas are presented to outsiders (Molvoda and Leila), including those outside of Kyrgyzstan, or in the way programming is transformed into action (Rahat). Again, language is the key denotation of expert knowledge here—both English, but also the discourse necessary to communicate to donors and international development organizations.

There are occasional exceptions to the power held by expert knowledge in the organizations. Over a dozen staff members attended the kick-off meeting for the third iteration of the climate-change adaptation program, including several who could not speak English and several expats that could not speak Russian. Though the meeting started in English, Laurie insisted that it switch to Russian so that all the local staff could understand and participate in the discussions, and the discussion itself was a lively one, with proposals from MSDSP staff that actually changed some of the details in the way the program was implemented. However, multiple staff members later informed me that this was the exception rather than the norm, and that such meetings were usually dull and achieved little. Also, even in this open meeting, the local staff's suggestions went through a filtering process when they were translated by Talant to Laurie (who then actually chose which ones to implement). Talant privileged some suggestions over others in his translation and funnelled them into his own vision of how the program should look. So, despite (or even within) such exceptions, knowledge of English or experience in the West ultimately grants development expertise, as well as the power to transform ideas into practice.

Those Kyrgyz staff members without a background or experience in the West are sent to trainings and workshops held by AKF global staff from Geneva or other transnational organizations (such as the climate-change training held by GIZ that Pirjan attended), or even go all the way to Geneva for trainings in the AKF head office. For instance, Leonora, the human resources manager at MSDSP, went to Geneva during my time there for training. This begs the question: what can be taught or transmitted about human resources in Switzerland that cannot be explained or understood in Kyrgyzstan? I would argue that the trainings abroad are another kind of epistemic glue, creating consensus around expert knowledge and the privileging of the West as the central source of knowledge within development practice—even (or perhaps particularly) with the managerial aspects of such practice, such as managing human resources. Thus, examining the network in Kyrgyzstan reveals the creation and privileging of a category of knowledge with the weight of authority and claims to a global geography: a knowledge privileged for its expertise, and on this basis accorded weight in the creation of development practice.

Bottom-Up Expertise: Experts Designated by the Local in Kenya

It is not only globally connected institutions that privilege and see the pragmatic need for expert knowledge. This privileging of expert knowledge also happens at the grassroots. Local people, too, see the advantages that leveraging experts who have access to certain tools, ideas, and language can have in the world of development projects and funding. This is demonstrated clearly in the second case study of this chapter: a forest conservation project in a north Kenyan village called Beliqo. The project is funded by the Christensen Fund (TCF), a biocultural diversity-focused foundation based in San Francisco, USA, but was instigated and run with the help of a small regional NGO called Waso Trustland (WTL), based in the town of Isiolo in Kenya's north. Waso Trustland itself is connected to the Christensen Fund through another non-profit, the Kivulini Trust, run out of Nairobi by Dr. Hussein, himself a former Program Officer for the Christensen Fund. The development organizations in this network are far more independent and loosely connected than those of AKF, AKF Kg, and MSDSP Kg. With its biocultural diversity focus, the Christensen Fund privileges local knowledge and shies away from designating expertise as explicitly as the Aga Khan Foundation. All members of the Christensen Fund's partner organizations in Kenya are actually Kenyans, though Dr. Hussein is Western educated (another example of the roots and insignia of expert knowledge). And yet, even in a local NGO far closer to the grassroots than MSDSP, expert knowledge is privileged and acknowledged.

This can be seen in Waso Trustland's charismatic founder, head and director, Hassan Shano.¹⁰ Although Dr. Hussein described Shano to me as a local or indigenous elder, Hassan Shano both sees himself and is seen by village communities in Northern Kenya as bringing information, knowledge, and skills from the global development communities. Indeed, one of Waso Trustland's main activities is running "sensitization" workshops in the region's villages, which educate local people about legal and political issues connected to land and natural resource use. This includes pragmatic knowledge of the Kenyan state and its legal instruments. Hassan Shano brought knowledge of the 2005 Kenyan Forest Act that granted power to community groups over local forests to concerned locals at the start of the TCF-funded forest conservation project in Beliqo. Shano also provided connections with civil society organizations with access to resources (including the Christensen Fund) who could help the village with its concerns. Indeed, most people I spoke to in Beliqo would tell me the community forest association and its forest conservation project was funded and supported by Waso Trustland—they very rarely acknowledged the Christensen Fund, despite the fact that Christensen staff members had visited the previous year, and that most people in the village were aware that WTL's funding came from foreigners.

¹⁰ Indeed, Waso Trustland is almost a one-man show: Besides Hassan Shano, there is only an administrative assistant and jack-of-all-trades (Liban), and sometimes a legal intern sponsored by a partnering NGO.

Shano also brought the model of a Community Forest Association to the village, mimicking those started earlier all around Kenya. These ideas and connections might not have originated with Shano, but for people in the village, he was the expert with national and global links who brought such knowledge. Finally, Shano had the specific knowledge necessary for forging access to international support: Not only did he speak English, which is essential for access to development programs and aid, but he also had experience with global civil society, knew how to write grant applications, and had access to information technology and a sense of international funders and non-profits. As Beliqo did not have electricity or a mobile phone signal, its residents also saw Shano's ability to use the internet as a skill and an advantage, a kind of development expertise. As I will discuss below, other development actors and organizations Shano interacted with did not see him as an expert. Nevertheless, to the people of Beliqo and many other locals in the region, he was as much the expert, and the harbinger of expert knowledge, as Laurie was to Pirjan or Talant at MSDSP.

Rhetorics of Local Knowledge and the Claim to Authenticity

Aspirations towards Local Knowledge at the Aga Khan Foundation

While the knowledge, legitimacy, and authority of experts and expertise is privileged in development practice, the rhetoric of international foundations and development charities simultaneously privileges the very opposite: the knowledge of the grassroots. This can be seen in the rhetoric—if not the practice—at the Geneva headquarters of the Aga Khan Foundation. Although AKF's Kyrgyz office and implementing partner NGO seek expertise and expert knowledge, staff members at the Geneva headquarters were fully and unequivocally committed to the global norms and ideas around participatory development. Participation, local knowledge, and local needs repeatedly came up unprompted during my interviews with staff at AKF's Geneva office, and were referenced many times in the Foundation's public discourse. Mark, then the head of Natural Resource Management at AKF, repeatedly referred to AKF's work as "community based" and insisted that AKF focuses on what the communities want, that it respects community perspectives, and thus that its priorities shift with community priorities. Indeed, Mark characterized AKF's mission as "working with communities to address their needs"—echoing the discourse of community-needs-based approaches.¹¹ He said the same of the natural resource management program he oversees—its priority is to respond to people's (economic) needs, and in the case of the climate-change adaptation program, "community is central—climate change is second." The words "community" and "needs"

¹¹ See, for instance, Chambers, 1983, 1986, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2004.

came up frequently in our conversation, and Mark attributed this emphasis to the Aga Khan himself, who told the staff at AKF to build on community interests and local knowledge and to trust the local people.

Mark applied this participation rhetoric specifically to AKF's climate-change adaptation program. In his words, community participation in program management and planning is "done all along," and AKF does not push fads onto communities or distort community needs. Mark argued that pushing fads is how one loses community support and that this is the danger with climate-change adaptation. For this reason, it had to be integrated and "mainstreamed" into "real concerns" such as pasture and water management (Conveniently, AKF Kg and MSDSP are already well-versed in and have the expert knowledge for these programs). Indeed, Mark showed acute awareness of the weaknesses of development organizations when working with local communities—he spoke of the danger that development projects could distort people's interests and create local groups that fell apart the minute a project ended. Mark reiterated that the climate-change adaptation project should engage already existing groups and build on people's interests by mainstreaming a climate-change perspective into key resource management. The ideal of using pre-existing CBOs (community-based organizations) as a way of ensuring both participation and success (indeed, the two seem to be synonymous for AFK Geneva) was also echoed by David, at the time the head of AFK's environmental fund,¹² when he stressed that the climate-change adaptation program "empowered village organizations," and that this is the AKF "mode"—along with bottom-up planning, which is a hope if not always a reality.

This vision of participation differs quite strongly from the way the climate-change adaption program ran on the ground—though the ideals and the rhetoric of participation exist throughout the network. The program's reality was largely centred around top-down knowledge, teaching about climate change and adaptation through workshops run by MSDSP, followed by an adaptation project which was selected and run by the community, but in practice was based on examples given during the workshops. The workshops themselves echo MSDSP's previous programs and areas of expertise. However, AKF headquarters is ideologically committed to the idea of participation and participatory development, despite also being committed to finding technical solutions to problems it deems largely economic. Its promotional material stresses that the foundation gives money to "local organizations interested in testing new solutions, in learning from experience and in being agents of lasting change" (Aga Khan Foundation, 2006, p. 3). This is repeated in the Foundation's annual report, which states that AKF focuses on "inclusive, community-based development approaches, in which local organizations identify, prioritize and implement projects with the Foundation's assistance" (Aga Khan Foundation, 2007, p. 7).

Such an emphasis on local knowledge directly echoes the language of participatory development, which stresses the importance of local participation and idea

¹²The Prince Sadruddin Fund for the Environment (PSAKFE).

creation—in other words, local knowledge—as an antidote to the many problems and inefficiencies of top-down development (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Community involvement and input is itself part of a transnational consensus or an epistemic community on development practice. However, I would argue that the Aga Khan Foundation is not searching for greater effectiveness in their programming, or even for the ideals of democratic civil involvement. The most central theme in the above quotes is the search for authenticity for the foundation itself. AKF's claims center around the organizational actors' awareness of real concerns and their response to real interests and existing problems. The emphasis on local reality gives the Aga Khan Foundation claim to authentic knowledge and experience—in other words, "street cred." This is not to say that the organization's emphasis on utilizing local knowledge is cynical. Their belief in its importance for development is likely entirely genuine, but it is notable that the higher up the organizational ladder I went, the more likely staff were to bring up participatory approaches and the importance of local knowledge. This points to a philosophical or ideological, rather than a practical or applied, concern with grassroots participation and input—a search for organizational authenticity.

Authenticity and Indigenous Knowledge: Funding Choices at the Christensen Fund

Much like the Aga Khan Foundation, the Christensen Fund uses the language of participation and locally led development. Indeed, because the Christensen Fund's mission is to promote biocultural diversity, privileging and prizing indigenous or traditional knowledge is core to the organization's mandate and aspirational rhetoric. Wolde Tadesse, the Program Officer for the East Africa region until 2014, told me that decisions must be made from the bottom, with community involvement and ownership of projects and project resources, and that the emphasis of TCF's work must be on inclusion rather than marginalization. Ken Wilson, the director of the Christensen Fund until 2015, reiterated the point and linked it to the decentralized nature of the Fund, telling me that the program officer for every region has their own unique strategy for funding distribution that is "shaped by context, by what is important to people, and what they'd like to change."

TCF went so far in emphasizing local needs and participation that it effaced and minimized its own role. In Ken's words, "institutions are essential for mobilizing resources, but can make complications and difficulties for movements: movements, individuals and issues should be core [to our work], not funding institutions." This is tied to the radical self-vision that TCF cultivates of itself, particularly in comparison to other international foundations. Ken stated that in trying to be "responsive to the goals and objectives of the leaders of [local] movements," TCF is "fairly extreme" in its decentralized approach: not only are its program officers located "on

the ground”—that is, they reside in regions where they oversee funding¹³—but TCF’s programs “involve multiple initiatives and grantees evolving in context,” as opposed to the much larger initiatives of other foundations that are centralized. Tadesse echoed this when he flatly told me that “we’re not telling [the grantees] what to do”—that TCF’s goal is to work with the approaches in indigenous cultures to biodiversity, and that TCF thus purposefully does not implement or operate any projects to this end, so that, in Tadesse’s words, these are “not our projects.”

Indeed, TCF is not primarily an operating or implementing foundation (unlike the Aga Khan Foundation). This seemed a point of pride with Ken Wilson, even on pragmatic grounds. He stated that operating foundations such as AKF operate in a “closed circle”—they themselves “decide what’s important, how to solve it, try to solve it themselves, and then evaluate.” Ken argued that this is inefficient, costs a lot more, and lacks critical feedback. He depicted TCF as the opposite of a closed loop—by focusing on building capacity, it outsources the task of both finding and fixing problems. Fundamentally, TCF sees itself as promoting grassroots inputs into the biocultural diversity movements—picking up ideas and giving them voice and support. Unlike the Aga Khan Foundation, TCF views the input of local or indigenous knowledge as going beyond specific, localized projects. Its staff members believe that this knowledge must be fed into global movements and knowledge commons—for instance to create and bolster the global indigenous rights movements. The foundation’s role thus becomes not simply to apply local knowledge, but to link it to the global or the expert. However, I would argue that the search for organizational authenticity and legitimacy is central in the Christensen Fund’s repeated insistence on their use of indigenous knowledge. Indeed, it is even more fundamental to their organizational mandate, since it is a fundamental part of biocultural diversity. TCF can only be authentic in its claims to promote and support biocultural diversity if it promotes and supports indigenous or traditional knowledge.

Transcending the Categories: Blurring the Lines between Global Authority and Local Authenticity

Hassan Shano at Conferences: Crossing the Lines

In this chapter, I have thus far suggested two categories of knowledge both created and prized by development organizations: expert and local. However, although development professionals maintain these two categories for difference purposes and uses, the distinctions and separations between them are not firm. Not only do they sometimes blur into each other—as in the case of TCF and MSDSP staff discussed below—but they are permeable, and the same individuals can cross between

¹³Although Tadesse is the exception, residing in Oxford, his replacement in 2014 resides in Nairobi, Kenya.

being the source of expert and the source of indigenous knowledge based on context. This allows for shifting uses of power, and the occasional decentering of “the legitimacy and authority of Western modernity” (Kothari, 2005, p. 443) in development.

Hassan Shano, the head of Waso Trustland, is a particularly compelling example of this transcendence. As argued above, in the setting of his own organization and the communities it serves in the north of Kenya, Shano fulfils the role of the expert, bringing the knowledge and skills that can connect these communities both to international development organizations and trends and to legal knowledge of the Kenyan state. However, for TCF or even its Kenyan partner Kivulini, Shano is an *indigenous elder*. Dr. Hussein brought Shano to speak at both the 2005 World Conference on Ecological Restoration in Zaragoza, Spain, specifically as an indigenous elder on the role of indigenous knowledge in environmental restoration, as well as to a number of events around the UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva. In both of these settings, Shano switched from his expert role in northern Kenya to being a representative of authentic indigenous knowledge.

In our conversation about these conferences, Shano seemed to be uncomfortable with the switch, preferring his role of expert in Isiolo to representing an indigenous elder in Geneva or Spain. However, Shano credits these conferences with making him realize the importance of culture and traditional knowledge and their value within global development and environmental organizations. Hassan Shano described the first time he attended the conference in Geneva, where during a day of cultural sharing, Maasai representatives, from Kenya came with “marvellous” traditional dress and performances. Hassan Shano described how he felt embarrassed that he did not have the same cultural artefacts to share, asking himself, “What about our Borana culture?”¹⁴ Shano credited this moment of shame, brought about by the exposure afforded by an international conference, with awakening his awareness of the significance of culture in the global realm, strengthened in turn by the Christensen Fund’s emphasis on biocultural diversity. Particularly startling in this story is the fact that Shano had to travel all the way to Switzerland in order to be exposed to the cultural assertion and strategies of another Kenyan ethnic group and to realize the value ascribed to such cultural expressions, and to local or indigenous knowledge more broadly, in global forums.

International conferences are not only an avenue for exposure to (both local and expert) knowledge—such as seeing Maasai culture presented—but also to the value and uses the international community ascribes to such knowledge. Thus, expert and local categories fuse and mix, just as Shano himself crossed the boundaries between the two depending on context and audience. As Smith and Jenkins (2012) have pointed out, “middling NGO activists” such as Shano “can play roles that challenge ‘either/or’ characterizations of development action, such as in being professionalized as opposed to political, elite as opposed to grassroots, and are at the centre of

¹⁴ Borana is both Hassan Shano’s ethnic group and also the ethnic background of the majority of village communities he works with. For a classic ethnography of the Borana, see Dahl (1979); for more on the political and social place of the Borana within Kenya, see Arero (2007).

the way such meanings are negotiated and played out through the machineries of development” (pp. 646–647). Shano thus complicates the local-expert binary. He is able to “exploit the artificial distinction between professional and local knowledges to claim authority and exert power” (Nightingale, 2005, p. 600)—both in Beliqo and in the global, expert setting of international conferences.

TCF and MSDSP Staff: Local or Expert?

The staff members of both the Christensen Fund and the Aga Khan Foundation, particularly at their implementing NGO MSDSP Kg, also illustrate the fluid boundaries between expert and local. As described above, MSDSP and AKF Kg prized local staff members who spoke fluent English, had experience in international organizations, and often had Western degrees. However, the promotional material described above, AKF made much of using local organizations and local staff members. Thus, AKF and MSDSP could benefit from having staff that simultaneously had the authority of experts and the authenticity of locals. This is even more obvious with the staff of the Christensen Fund. When I asked Ken Wilson about the gap between the foundation and actors on the ground, he went out of his way to depict how TCF attempts to forge closer links with the grassroots by employing staff that themselves could be considered part of the movements and peoples TCF attempts to help. He made the case that program staff members are “tangled up in the movements they fund” and thus are ultimately insiders and participants. Thus, Ken Wilson seemed to be presenting TCF staff almost in an intermediary role, a position they are able to take up because they claim to belong to the grassroots.

These claims are somewhat tenuous: the majority of TCF staff have a Western education and now live in the West. For instance, though Yeshe, then a grant associate at TCF, is from Ethiopia, she has a master’s degree from the Institute of Social Science (ISS) in the Netherlands. Yet what these assertions emphasize is TCF’s need to demonstrate its close connection to the grassroots, a connection that would legitimize the foundation’s discourse privileging the local as the authentic repository of indigenous knowledge and as the crux of the foundation’s work. In an interview two years later Ken reiterated the point, emphasizing the wide diversity of world views and perspectives and the “depth of knowledge” held by TCF staff, for instance of local languages and contexts, songs, and plants. In Ken’s words, being a “staff-rich foundation” meant that TCF is able to “work on complex issues.” Staff diversity is thus linked with insider knowledge, and enabled what Ken termed the “human relationships between staff and communities,” the closeness and authentic knowledge of the grassroots. Just as “indigenous knowledge is becoming professionalized” (Laurie, Andolina, & Radcliffe, 2005, p. 476), so too can professional or expert knowledge become indigenized by way of claims to local authenticity and identity. But I would argue that this is more than simply “adverse incorporation” (Kothari, 2005, p. 429)—it shows the conceptual power that notions of grassroots,

indigenous or local knowledge hold within the development project, even at its most globalized spatial levels.

Holding Typologies of Knowledge in Tension: AKF's View of Climate-Change Adaptation and TCF's Involvement in Programming

How do foundations like the Aga Khan Foundation and the Christensen Fund reconcile their simultaneous privileging of the authority of expert knowledge and the authenticity of local knowledge? These two typologies of knowledge seem to be distinct paradigms for the two organizations. It was only in response to direct questioning that staff members spoke of the fact that the two must interact, and even then, they tended to stress the importance of either one form of knowledge or the other. For instance, when asked whether TCF itself brought new knowledge to the communities whose indigenous knowledge it prizes, Ken Wilson stressed that TCF barely introduces imperatives to the grassroots, but rather presents knowledge and offers “new horizons of what can be achieved and ways to achieve this.” Indeed, in its mission statement explication TCF depicts the organization as a “buttress”:

The Fund is choosing to ‘buttress’ these [grassroots] efforts, not just fund them—that is, we will back them, bolster them, support them and, in a gentle solid way, engaged in co-creation at times, but not ourselves seeking to direct the process, just as the ‘buttress’ on the wall of an ancient tower or rampart serves to secure and yet not dominate the crucial wall. (The Christensen Fund, 2010)

By utilizing this metaphor, TCF is engaging with the tension between local autonomy and TCF’s involvement, between bottom-up indigenous knowledge and the globalized, expert knowledge of the organization itself. Thus, TCF rejects “direct[ing] the process” but acknowledges that its influence and involvement go beyond funding. When asked directly if TCF changes its grantees, Ken Wilson’s answer was “Yes, definitely.” He termed TCF’s involvement as “thick grant making,” that “the program officer influences projects and organizations through dialogue, [he or she] probes, asks questions, pushes, brings information.” Yet such involvement remains in fine balance with TCF’s protests that the Fund does not impinge on local autonomy or ideas. Yeshe TekleMichael, the grant associate at TCF who works under Tadesse, told me that Tadesse might push or encourage communities, but tries not to impose—in her words, he “just gives voice to what they want to do.” In short, the Fund attempts to resolve the tension between valuing both its own influence and local ideas by insisting that although influence and knowledge might come from TCF, autonomy and ownership remains with the local.

The Aga Khan Foundation’s headquarters are also caught between two visions of its epistemic approach. Thus, Mark admitted that although His Highness the Aga Khan wants AKF to build on local knowledge, this could also be too narrow a perspective for its work. He asserted that the foundation is not “slavish” to community

knowledge, that it seeks to bring to communities outside expertise and “independent channels of information,” and to develop knowledge and reduce ignorance. Both Mark and David highlighted the process of spreading knowledge while implementing the ideals of bottom-up development as a challenge that AKF is actively struggling with. In David’s words, using bottom-up planning is a hope for AKF, but the foundation relies heavily on Western knowledge. Mark told me that AKF is “looking for new ways that knowledge and ideas are shared”, and that this is a continuing struggle for AKF. He argued that filling broad knowledge gaps is a rocky and slow process with “high costs of information transfers.” Mark argued that the Foundation is doing this by involving local institutions (linking back to its participatory rhetoric), as well as by providing overhead for “information transfer processes” that the foundation co-ordinates and facilitates.

This tension is particularly obvious in the case of the climate-change adaptation program. The climate-change adaptation literature has criticized bottom-up programming for ignoring the multiscale nature of climate change: local communities cannot easily engage with national or global priorities for adaptation (Thornton & Manasfi, 2010). Despite his repeated emphasis on the importance of local needs and local ideas, when pressed Mark admitted that the foundation sometimes had to “educate” local communities, and that they could not be expected to know about issues such as climate change. Indeed, Mark framed knowledge transfers as an issue of responsibility in a climate-change adaptation program—he told me that AKF does recognize “the responsibility to raise the [climate change] issue with the community.” Thus, when pushed Mark admitted that both knowledge from above and below was vital. How AKF resolves tensions and contradictions between the two—for instance, if local communities were not interested in or did not believe in climate change—was never explicitly explained or addressed.

Conclusion

The case studies above have demonstrated the propensity of development organizations to both create and make use of two categories of knowledge: the expert and the local. The first brings development organizations not only legitimacy, but also authority, and despite its pretensions of global roots it often in fact represents Western training, ideas, or consensus. The second connects the development project to the (now global) idea of participatory or community-based development, and gives global civil society a claim to authenticity through its connections to citizen or indigenous knowledge. However, the two are deeply integrated, despite the propensity of global foundations such as AKF and TCF to treat them as distinctly separate categories. Not only are the lines between the two nebulous and at times crossed by the same actors, but expert knowledge both gains legitimacy from local knowledge and local knowledge itself can be constituted by global movements, such as those which privilege traditional culture or indigenous rights.

Civil society knowledge networks (Fouksman, 2017) such as the two described in this chapter act as vectors for ideas that emerge from a variety of geographies and integrate this knowledge into development interventions. Actors in the networks who can claim to be indigenous or local can wield power by granting authenticity to global organizations, the way Hassan Shano does with TCF, in the process getting local concerns heard or funded—but also shaping these concerns to global interests. And sometimes, the very same actors can claim authority by drawing on expert knowledge—the way Hassan Shano does in the village communities he works with, for instance by his ability to write successful grant applications. Indeed, this need not be a cynical transformation or manipulation: not only are the categories fluid, but they can in fact be open and accessible, dependant on context, object, and subject. Thus, civil society knowledge networks allow different ideas, needs, and visions of development to interact and shape each other, not in a simple hierarchy of global over local, but rather in a complex interaction, often leading to the emergence of something hybrid—be it the integration of infrastructural needs into climate-change adaptation or a community forest association that allows pastoralists to control the usage rights of local land.

In theory, a locally-bound, participatory, and context-specific approach has challenged the Western-based and expert-led modernization approach that characterized development practice in the 1950s and 60s. But how deep has this challenge been? Alongside the rhetoric of context specificity, local knowledge, and community participation, development as both a universal aim and practice has continued to be “the central organizing concept of our time” (Cowen & Shenton, 1995, p. 27). For instance, although participatory approaches became ever more prominent in development practice in the early 2000s, so too did the widespread acceptance of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals, which set the overall, universal aims of development. The privileging and lauding of local ideas, itself a universalizing discourse rooted in Western interest in Romantic Orientalism (Washbrook, 1999) and continued in postmodernist cultural relativism and participatory approaches to development, coexists alongside a continued search for knowledge of universal development aims and solutions, rooted in the Enlightenment and then colonial views of progress and shared humanity. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the development project has become the key place of negotiation and enactment of these two visions, often held simultaneously by the same development actors.

Unpicking this negotiation is vital to understanding the way certain ideas and projects are justified and supported over others. The Christensen Fund embodies the power of these categories when Ken Wilson speaks about bringing local activists and local leaders to international conferences and UN meetings. In so doing, TCF sees itself as using its expert status within these international circles to promote local knowledge on the global stage. In selecting which local activists and which local ideas are brought to and promoted at these global (and largely Western) gatherings, TCF utilizes the category of local knowledge to promote the agenda and ideas it holds dear, while demonstrating that these ideas are in fact authentically

local. Authenticity and authority are tightly interwoven in such an interplay of local and expert knowledge categories.

In examining this interplay, I have demonstrated that although the development project creates, relies on and privileges both categories, power and knowledge is still enacted in the Foucauldian sense—the West is able to exercise power over the local in the South. In part, this is simply a distribution of resources and historical power, but the West continues to justify and explain this very distribution by laying claim to global or universalizing discourse. Thus, expert knowledge becomes global knowledge and this global claim is bolstered by the rhetoric of local participation and citizen knowledge. This chapter has shown the way development practitioners try to lay claim to both knowledge typologies: they see themselves as in touch with the local, but as possessing instruments of expert knowledge such as log frames and impact assessments to demonstrate that their interventions are objectively correct. This brings the argument back to the Enlightenment paradigm of universal, scientific knowledge—now represented as expert knowledge, which continues to play a key role in the development project, despite the apologetics of the particularism and relativism of the local. And yet the discourse of the local and the participatory holds power too, by conferring authenticity as well as legitimacy to the development project. Thus, power becomes not a top-down imposition, but rather “individuals... and communities absorb, assume, resist, claim and interface with power and they too are implicated in [its] character, form and techniques” (Meade, 2012, p. 891).

Of course, as Beinart, Brown, and Gilfoyle (2009) point out, there is real utility for both what is categorized as scientific and as local knowledge, and to try to divorce and separate the two is simplistic. Perhaps one of the staff members at MSDSP Kg highlights the point—the organization has its own in-house civil engineer to plan and help build its infrastructure projects. This is a Kyrgyz man who has never left the country, was educated locally, and speaks no English. He has nothing to do with international organizations (other than ultimately drawing his salary from one) and does not have to speak the language of grant-writing. His does not fit the typology of expert knowledge, yet his knowledge of civil engineering is in a sense truly global: there is largely global consensus on how to build an irrigation canal or lay a pipe. Thus, the categories and their uses in international development lie in tension and often in contradiction; yet they play a crucial role in development institutions’ epistemic search for authority and authenticity.

To critically evaluate the development project now, one must be conscious of the way power is deployed; these typologies of knowledge could be the present’s version of the orientalism and scientific Enlightenment universalism of colonialism. Built implicitly into colonial power structures were troubling assumptions about race, geography and culture, be they stereotypes of noble savages or scientifically backward primitives. Today’s parallel assumptions might be that there are global experts and authentic locals, and that these can be sharply separated. Indeed, both academia and society more broadly are struggling to bring together the apparent universality of science—and from it, technocratic, evidence-based interventions—with the insights of poststructuralism, cultural specificity, and indigenous knowledge. But rarely does it matter so much to people’s lives as in the case of justifying

the course of development interventions. This is a key battleground of power, and the structure within which both the actors and the subjects of development must operate.

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