



Breakfast in Aidland: Quotidian Relations and Structural Contradictions

Astrid Jamar
March, 2017



I walked out of my bedroom to a table garnished with exotic fruits, freshly pressed juice, bread and coffee. During breakfast in Aidland, I usually was occupied with worries about finishing a report, organising my schedule to accommodate for back to back meetings, and/or attending a workshop outside the capital. I might need to discuss money matters and duties with home workers.



Enjoying the beautiful garden with palm trees, colourful flowers and green grass trimmed by the gardener, the driver tooted his horn and the guards opened the gate.

The house remained active once I was gone. The cook washed the dishes, went for groceries, washed and ironed the clothes, and set the table for lunch. To be viewed as a good cook, a range of skills are required. One must be well organised, accomplish chores with limited supervision, know western and exotic recipes, be trustful, not steal, and be fluent in French or English. Guards are there to watch over the house 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They are supposed to protect aid workers from post-conflict insecurity and potential burglars. Their main work, however, is to open and close the gate and run errands such as going to the corner shop. Of course, not every expatriate sits daily at the table to enjoy a nice breakfast. However the vast majority of expatriate aid workers, as local upper and middle classes in my fieldwork setting do have house staff. This generally includes a cook, guards, a gardener, and for families with children a nanny.



Security in Aidland - Kigali, Rwanda (photo by Astrid Jamar)

Some aid organisations hire and are in charge of house workers for their



expatriate staff. Otherwise, expatriate workers manage house workers themselves. For 'junior' expatriates, house-sharing is the most common living situation, enabling a decent house in a pleasant neighbourhood (with access to electricity, hot water and the Internet) and inclusive of a house workers service. As wages vary greatly for house workers, expatriates are known to pay house staff more than local employers, even rich locals. Compared with expatriates' own salaries, the house workers' pay is low, but up to six times higher than offered by local standards.

Wage discrepancies create inequality between expatriates and domestic workers, but also among the domestic workers themselves and the local population.

Through informal discussions with other aid workers, I observed various ethical concerns about wages. Expatriates who paid lower salaries considered that a house worker should not receive a salary higher than a national university professor, while others establishing the highest wages believed that paying someone less than what was needed for a decent life was slavery. Generally, a cook receives a higher salary than guards, who in turn get more than the gardeners. By default, the best-paid cooks surely have a lower paid cook at home reflecting a hierarchy of pay.

Beyond determining the wage and working hours, every expatriate household needs to define the specific tasks of their workers and negotiate a daily relationship. As unemployment is high, labour is cheap, and there is no washing machine, it is understood that these activities can be done by the house workers especially since grocery shopping is not done at the supermarket, but in small shops where prices need to be negotiated. In Aidland, hiring local house workers is the norm in support of international staff for their daily life in an 'unknown' country.

In line with existing scholarship on aid and post-colonialism, this description of household maintenance brings attention to the complexity of social relations in



Aidland (Mosse 2010; Kothari 2005; Sylvester 1999). A number of scholars underline the paternalistic behaviour of western donors towards recipients by adopting technical approach to fix dysfunctional states (e.g. Duffield and Hewitt 2013; Escobar 2011; Paris 2002). In relation to development aid workers, Roth (2012) and Fechter (2012) draw attention to contexts marked by major disparities between expatriates and local, and the resulting paternalist and patronising behaviour (see also Baaz 2005). I argue that such analysis is relevant for other aid-dependant fields, such as transitional justice, peacebuilding and the promotion of human rights (see also Autesserre 2014; Madlingozi, 2010). Indeed, these professional environments are also heavily marked by wage inequalities among and between expatriates and national staff, depending on place of origin, nationality, educational background and experience.

In the personal sphere of aid workers, the house setting is marred by contradictions in which people share an intimacy while having very different lifestyles.

While the presence of servants is normalised, it still involves relational, socio-economic and often unspoken ethical complications. Ethnographic research on expatriate aid workers addresses the dilemmas associated with these lifestyle privileges (Roth 2012; Eyben 2012; Fechter 2012). It encourages many expatriate employers to support domestic workers beyond their salary. A house workers' wage does not enable them to cover their extra expenses, thus they frequently ask for school fees, medical expenses, funeral expenses, travel expenses for a sick relative, and/or funds for house repairs. This engenders a particular interaction between expatriate staff and local house workers in which hierarchy and patronising behaviours occur. But this is also reflected in the professional environment through relations between and among expatriate and local colleagues.



Resting in War Zones - Gisenyi, Rwanda (photo by Astrid Jamar)

Experiences of theft and humorous anecdotes are widely discussed among expatriates, whereas separations are silently integrated. Within the private sphere, it is normalised that house workers will not eat the same food as is prepared for expatriates – they do not eat at the table and use basic outside sanitation. Guards are not allowed to walk into the house. Many anecdotes involve issues related to misunderstandings: missing food, expensive goods, significant amounts of money, drinking during receptions, or damaging clothes. While many expatriates rely on trust, some have drawn lines on food jars and bottles to monitor the cook's use while others have locked cupboards containing food.

The relationships between expatriates and local servants are tangible instances of everyday behaviours representing paternalism combining aspects of support and surveillance.

These anecdotes portray a local worker who tends to be inefficient, slow, or



scams new arrivals. This reproduces the stereotype of the dishonest, lazy and stupid local worker, with the good worker portrayed as the exception. Arriving with a willingness to 'help Africa', the aid worker's first encounters tend to create disappointment, over-cautiousness, and simultaneously paternalistic behaviours. Such normalised unequal relationships highlight the hierarchical structures within which expatriate aid workers work.

Within the professional environment, similar unequal structures and quotidian relations are translated into significant differences in terms of salaries, housing packages and travel expenses based on technical and expert knowledge, often falling along existing national and social divides rather than actual capacities. This social environment creates a similar sense of unease and unfairness that can create tensions in a professional team. While these material and social privileges are associated with higher expertise and capacities, they also give more decisional power to the most privileged and hence less to those at lower levels of hierarchy. In the worst cases, this might result in 'I know better' behaviours, or stereotypical presumptions of projects failure due to local issues rather than as a result of adopting the wrong approach.

Professional practices of aid-dependent practitioners are embedded in these post-colonial contexts, where behaviours of paternalism and an emancipatory discourse are based on western ideas that are omnipresent and on an unequal power hierarchy that is silenced by a discourse of progress. The transitional justice and peacebuilding practices become absorbed by these unequal structures in which routines become invisible and unquestioned. As Lisa Smirl's work with humanitarian workers demonstrated, the everyday structure provides a formulated, rational and readymade bureaucratic approach to deal with the contradictions faced. This leaves the issues of power and the hermetic nature of aid unquestioned and marginalised (Smirl 20; Smirl 2011).

While this picture is far from that of the extreme racial segregation under colonial authority, it is not insignificant in representing the emancipative and imperial approach to work by many aid workers. Even if many reject neo-colonial



moralising views, expatriate and high-level local aid workers are operating in hierarchical and unequal structures that place them as privileged deciding who will receive their support and how. Inevitably, professional practices are taking place within these structures and affect how practitioners interact with each other, and how they implement and negotiate aid-dependent policies.

References

- Autesserre, Séverine. 2014. *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention*. Cambridge University Press.
- Baaz, Maria. 2005. *The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid*. Reference, Information and Interdisciplinary Subjects Series. Zed Books.
- Duffield, Mark. 2005. "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Development, Security and the Colonial Present." *Conflict, Security & Development* 5 (2): 141-59.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2011. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Eyben, Rosalind. 2012. "Fellow Travellers in Development." *Third World Quarterly* 33 (8).
- Fechter, Anne-Meike. 2012. "'Living Well' While 'Doing Good'? (Missing) Debates on Altruism and Professionalism in Aid Work." *Third World Quarterly* 33 (8).
- Kothari, Uma. 2005. "From Colonial Administration to Development Studies: A Post-Colonial Critique of the History of Development Studies." In *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies*, Zed



Books.

Madlingozi, Tshepo. 2010. "On Transitional Justice Entrepreneurs and the Production of Victims." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2 (2).

Mosse, David. 2011. *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*. Studies in Public and Applied Anthropology. Berghahn Books.

Paris, Roland. 2002. "International Peacebuilding and the 'mission Civilisatrice.'" *Review of International Studies* 28 (04).

Smirl, Lisa. 2008. "Building the Other, Constructing Ourselves: Spatial Dimensions of International Humanitarian Response." *International Political Sociology* 2 (3).

———. 2015. *Spaces of aid: how cars, compounds and hotels shape humanitarianism*. Zed Books. Roth, Silke. 2012. "Professionalisation Trends and Inequality: Experiences and Practices in Aid Relationships." *Third World Quarterly* 33 (8).

Sylvester, Christine. 1999. "Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: Disparate Tales of the 'Third World.'" *Third World Quarterly* 20 (4).

This post was first published on 19 February 2016.