

## Review - The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work

Written by Jeevan Sharma

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review - The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/14/review-the-personal-and-the-professional-in-aid-work/>

JEEVAN SHARMA, FEB 14 2014

The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work

Edited by Anne-Meike Fechter

London and New York: Routledge, 2014

### Anthropology and Development

Aid work has been a subject of scholarly and public scrutiny for quite some time. It has encompassed a number of interrelated themes including the most popular debate on whether aid works: its effectiveness and expenditure; the disconnect between the promise of aid policy and its actual performance; the entry of new or emerging donors; the rise of private sector actors and the promise and skepticism associated with the use of Randomized Control Trials in development among many others. Thanks to the work of a number of anthropologists of development, new genres of writings have surfaced recently that offer critical discussion on aid institutions, its assemblages and professionals. The publications of *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies* (2006) edited by Lewis and Mosse, *Adventures in Aidland: the Anthropology of Professionals in International Development* (2011) edited by Mosse and *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers: the Challenges and Futures of Aidland* (2011) by Fechter and Hindman, as well as a number of journal articles on the subject of institutions and professionals in the last few years are clear evidence of growing interest in this field. The scholars working in this genre have shown that anthropologists can do more than produce thick description and writing detailed ethnographies. They can also produce fine analyses on the actual practice of everyday aid work through their focus on the professionals and institutions and the intended and unintended effects these have on the people and states where they work.

### Altruism and 'doing well'

The new volume titled *The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work*, edited by anthropologist Anne-Meike Fechter, continues to expand this sub-field, with its specific focus on how the personal and professional selves are related in aid work and their potential relevance for aid work. The book takes an issue with the absence of personal in the debate and discussion on aid work and argues 'this situation contrasts with the salience of the personal for aid workers, which becomes evident, for example, in the burgeoning popularity of their blogs and memoirs' (p.2). In the introductory chapter, Fechter offers an answer to this 'absence' based in the belief that aid work is seen as an altruistic and selfless enterprise intended to help the poor. 'In a framework that sees aid work as fundamentally altruistic, this projects the aid worker self as something to be made invisible, so as not to get in the way of helping others.' (p. 15). Likewise, Fechter suggests unlike other helping professions such as Social Work or Nursing that have established academic debates and systems of practice on the personal lives of professionals, aid work 'emphasises the practitioner's role as facilitator or broker whose agency needs to be hidden, and whose task is to straddle the discrepancies between policy and practice' (p.5).

An immediate response may be the 'professionalisation of aid work', which as Fechter (Chapter 1 and 6) and Roth (Chapter 5) raise, has its own problems. Not only does it lead to hierarchies and disadvantage those from the Global South, but the push towards professionalization comes with standardization, objectivity and depersonalisation. Here it is useful to note that the institutional set up of international aid work is changing rapidly with the entry of private

## Review - The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work

Written by Jeevan Sharma

sector firms, new managerial short-term contractors and an evidence-based turn where the idea of altruism has very little relevance. This probably means that the idea of altruism is the remains of the past and *helping* and *suffering* have found new meanings in the changing institutional landscape. Thus, aid workers 'unease' (p. 90-96) may have very little relevance in the context of the changing institutional landscape. Although a sociological study of aid workers is not available, with more universities than ever before offering academic degrees and professional qualifications in development studies and humanitarian studies, the sector probably employs a large number of graduates with development and humanitarian studies in their qualification titles. These qualifications cost money and time and it is therefore perfectly understandable for these graduates to enter the field, with the intention to live well and earn. Perceptions of aid workers amongst new entrants therefore may be very different to those interviewed by the authors in this edited volume.

In popular debate, we are confronted with the contrasting image of aid workers who are either seen as selfless 'heroes' who travel to distant places to help save and protect lives in places that lack basic facilities or security, or self-interested individuals enjoying a luxury life and attractive benefits that come with expatriate life. While travelling and working in different parts of the world, many aid workers may face hardships in the absence of basic amenities and security and many face threats and even die while saving lives. Others may build new lives by marrying someone from the local area or building life long friendships, or adopting a child and others may just go around the world until they decide to retire at home, wherever that might be. Disruption of established relationships between places, home, social and familial ties, as well as new connections and belonging and privileges that come with it are all parts of aid workers' lives that are intrinsically connected to their professional lives. Likewise, motivations for joining aid work may range from a shortage of employment in other sectors, to excitement that comes with travelling abroad to altruism and commitment to help others to name but a few. Fechter calls aid work 'all encompassing' (pp. 5-7), which demands personal commitment such as working long hours like third sector or charity workers. However, it is also their relocation to far away places from the country of origin and having to negotiate, family, friends, visa regulations and cultural surroundings like many other expatriates that extends the personal commitment required of aid workers.

To Fechter, it is doing this emotionally challenging mission work abroad that is specific about the lives of aid workers, unlike other expatriate workers who are motivated by career benefits and other rewards. In this representation, what emerges is a very specific idea of an aid worker. Here, it may be useful to note that aid workers have diverse motivations or mind-sets. Being on a mission and contributing to social justice may be a major motivation but it is not the only one. Working as an aid worker allows one to travel, meet new people, experience the world beyond familiar surroundings or may even offer an escape from it and may come with comparatively higher perks and benefits that are not always available in other jobs. In many respects, aid workers lives are comparable to the lives of migrant workers; such as Malawian or Nepali nurses working in the UK, or even South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf, or international journalists. As indicated earlier in this review, new entrants in aid work, especially those who work with private consulting firms working in the humanitarian or development aid field, may well be comparable to other expatriate workers. Also, what we must not forget in this debate is that a large number of aid workers come from Southern countries and many may in fact work in a similar context to their own.

This edited volume has previously been published as a special issue of 'Third World Quarterly' (2012, 32(8)). Publishing these articles in the form of a book will certainly make the discussion accessible to a wider audience. In addition to the introduction chapter by Fechter and the conclusion chapter by Apthorpe that offer conceptual discussions on the topic, each of the remaining eight chapters, present case studies from different parts of the world, illustrating how the personal and the professional are intertwined in aid work. The themes that are covered include: identities and personal relationships (Chapter 2), significance of friendship (Chapter 3), mutual perception (or rather imagining) of aid workers, volunteers and recipients (Chapter 4 and 7), power and professionalization (Chapter 5, 6 and 8), money and resource (Chapter 9) and mind-sets (Chapter 6 and 10). What all these chapters show is that the personal is important and that it is indeed related to the professional. Overall, it covers some of the issues highlighted in the public criticisms of aid, including those by anti-aid campaigners, as well those to do with some of the 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) of aid workers. However, the book does not tell us: how exactly does the personal matter in aid work, for whom does it matter and does it matter differently for aid workers than any other expatriate workers, or workers in general (who work in their own home community)? Furthermore, the book also misses: what does giving more space to the personal mean in a context, when there seems to be a strong towards more depersonalised and

## Review - The Personal and the Professional in Aid Work

Written by Jeevan Sharma

objective mode of doing aid work?

### For Further Discussion

One may conclude with a few questions that the book helps raise:

*Firstly*, having read the book, one could say that a study of the sociology of aid workers would be a good place to start the debate. We need to understand some basic questions first: Who are the aid workers? What qualifications do they have? Why do they join aid work? How long do/ or have they work(ed) in aid work? What are their career trajectories?

*Secondly*, while the discussion on aid worker's lives is insightful and fascinating, a more useful question would be what are the specific implications of this for the practice and politics of development aid in general? Will this personal turn in development divert our attention away from some of the most pressing issues facing aid work today? Does it get too personal and conceal some of the bigger institutional or political issues shaping aid work and the material outcomes? As indicated above, some of these challenges involve new managerialism in aid work, anti-aid campaigning, entry of private sector actors and the evidence based turn in aid work among others.

*Thirdly*, it would be useful to think about how do the politics and ethics of aid work affect the personal lives of aid workers and vice versa? In other words, how does the ethics and politics of aid work and institutions relate to the ethics of its aid workers?

*Fourthly*, more specifically, what might be the implications of the recent push towards the introduction of social experiments in aid work that leave no or very little space for the personal lives of aid workers.

### References

Fechter, A.M. & Hindman, H. (2011), *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers: The Challenges and Futures of Aidland*. Sterling, VA: The Kumarian Press.

Lewis, D. & Mosse, D. (2006), *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.

Mosse, D. (ed.) (2011), *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*. London: Berghahn Books.

Scott, J. C. (1990), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Vol. 251. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

---

### About the author:

**Jeevan R Sharma** is Lecturer in South Asia and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. He has a wide range of interest in academia as well as policy research in international development. His current research interests include marginal areas of South Asia (Nepal and India), border-crossings, political violence, social transformation, livelihoods, labour mobility, masculinities, brokerage, public health systems and foreign aid.