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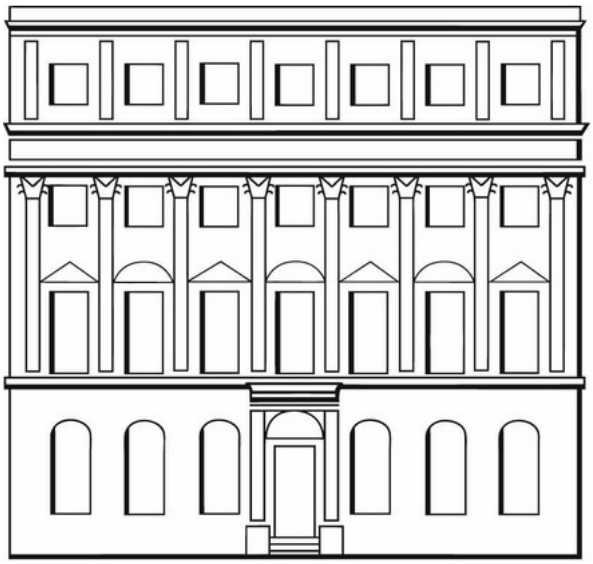
in

JOHANNES PAULMANN (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

pp. 417–435

ISBN: 978 0 19 877897 4



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DOI:

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Eva Spies

Since the colonial era, sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed the arrival and departure of various development strategies. Most of the policies were designed by development agencies and governments of the Global North, and were aimed at guiding developments throughout the continent and beyond. Development strategies—for example, modernization, basic needs, self-help, structural adjustment, sustainable development, capacity-building, and poverty reduction—not only provide catchy terms for expressing the central elements of each approach, but also establish certain premisses about the relationship between developed and not-so-developed actors—be they countries, states, populations, or individuals—and define development goals and the means of fulfilling them. In defining the development configuration in this way, the strategies and, more generally, discourses of development shape development practice and the world that development aid workers live and work in. Development aid as it is understood here is a subform of current international humanitarian aid. Like the latter, development work is based on a moral discourse of humanitarianism as well as on the dichotomy of those to be helped and those who are able to help. Because development aid today is characterized by long-term efforts to bring about change and an ideal of close co-operation between aid provider and recipient, the ambivalences and dilemmas of aid stand out clearly.[1]

[1] There is no clear-cut definition either of the concept of development aid or of the notion of humanitarian aid. I understand humanitarian aid as an umbrella term comprising different forms of aid, including different organizational forms and aid policies but joined together by a normative discourse on helping the helpless. For the problem of definition and the changing narratives of humanitarian aid see Johannes Paulmann, 'Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century', *Humanity*, 4/2 (2013), 215–38.

Much work has been done in recent years on analysing and deconstructing the development gaze of the Global North, and the ambiguities and contradictions of development discourses.[2] The present essay builds on this work, but it will not concentrate on the policies, discourses, or institutions of development and their deconstruction. Instead it focuses on the actors of a particular development configuration and the effects of the 'participatory development' approach on the everyday social practice of development aid workers. By focusing on European development aid workers and the problems they encounter while trying to implement 'participatory' development ideals in daily interaction, I would like to show that interpersonal intercultural interaction is a central factor in development work, and that this interaction is influenced by development discourses and their 'buzzwords'.[3] More precisely, I will ask what it means for European development aid workers on the ground (I will call them 'developers') to live and act in a field of conflicting demands arising from 'participatory development' ideals. Although it is self-evident that the world of development can be understood only by combining different perspectives and levels of analysis, to understand the problems of development we also need to look at the everyday problems associated with the development encounter. By taking this back-door approach to the world of development—that is, by taking the desires, ideals, and problems of developers seriously—it may be possible to open up another perspective on

[2] On the deconstruction of discourses and concepts of development see e.g. Andrea Cornwall, 'Buzzwords and Fuzzwords: Deconstructing Development Discourse', *Development in Practice*, 17/4–5 (2007), 471–84; ead. and Deborah Eade (eds.), *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords* (Oxford, 2010); Michael P. Cowen and R. W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London, 1996); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, 1995); Katy Gardner and David Lewis, *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge* (London, 1996); Ralph D. Grillo und Roderick L. Stirrat (eds.), *Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford, 1997); Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Dilemmas of Development Discourse: The Crisis of Developmentalism and the Comparative Method', *Development and Change*, 22 (1991), 5–29; and Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London, 1992).

[3] See Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at "Participation", "Empowerment" and "Poverty Reduction"', *Third World Quarterly*, 26/7 (2005), 1043–60, at 1055; eaed., *Beyond Buzzwords: 'Poverty Reduction', 'Participation' and 'Empowerment' in Development Policy*, UN Research Institute for Social Development Programme Paper, 10 (Geneva, 2005), 2, available online at ⟨http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/%28httpAuxPages%29/F25D3D6D27E2A1ACC12570CB002FFA9A/$file/cornwall.pdf⟩ [accessed 2 Jan. 2016].

development work and provide a complementary interpretation of its difficulties.[4]

Drawing on my fieldwork in Niger, I will argue that for many developers of the younger generation 'participation' works as model of and for social relations between themselves and the people 'to be developed'. Participation in this sense is more than a buzzword, technique, or output of development work—it is a model of and for understanding the other of the development encounter.[5] As a model for social relations, 'participation' implies an ethics of understanding the other, which articulates what appears to be the appropriate manner for dealing with locals; however, its exigencies are ambiguous as 'participation' combines contradictory evaluations of (cultural) difference. While morally correct, in practice understanding the other in a 'participatory mode' leads developers straight to certain dilemmas: however a developer decides to act to fulfil one demand of the participatory norm, (s)he will, as we will see, always end up contradicting another. Following contradictory participatory ideals therefore necessarily culminates in a quandary for developers, who find themselves unable to do the right thing. The easiest way for developers in Niger to escape situations characterized by such dilemmas appears to be simply to avoid situations leading to dilemmas. But what does this mean for development co-operation? In this essay I will argue that the contradictions, normativity, and dogmatism of participatory approaches may ultimately result in a decline in social relations between developers and local people, and not in their promotion, as actually envisaged by the idea of participation.

I will begin by discussing the concept of 'participation'—its

[4] On the term 'developers', see e.g. Georgia Kaufmann, 'Watching Developers: A Partial Ethnography', in Grillo and Stirrat (eds.), *Discourses of Development*, 107–31; and Timothy Morris, *The Despairing Developer: Diary of an Aid Worker in the Middle East* (London, 1991). The use of this term does not necessarily mean the assumption of a clear-cut separation between 'developers' and 'those to be developed'.

[5] I refer here to Clifford Geertz's essay 'Religion as a Cultural System', in id., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1966; repr. London, 1975), 87–125. Henkel and Stirrat, who work on the religious roots and connotations of the notion of participation, criticize Robert Chambers, one of the most famous proponents of a participatory approach to development, as his approach reminds the authors of the 'Geertzian notion of religion as a model of and a model for behaviour': Heiko Henkel and Roderick L. Stirrat, 'Participation as a Spiritual Duty: Empowerment as a Secular Subjection', in Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (eds.), *Participation: The New Tyranny*? (2001; repr. London, 2007), 168–84, at 177. This observation is valid, in my view, but it could be applied to many forms of ideology and the functioning of convictions. Cf. Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London, 1983).

progression into the development mainstream, the critique that followed, and the ambiguities inherent in this concept of development relations. Taking an example of a dilemma situation, I will then show how the contradictory ideals of participation shape interactions between development workers and 'locals'. The following section describes the options developers choose to deal with such dilemmas, and the essay concludes with some general remarks on the challenges of 'understanding the other' as, after all, development work is a human enterprise and understanding the other is fundamental to it.

Participation: Concept, Critique, Contradictions

Although every development strategy is characterized by special keywords, development language is far from unequivocal. It is always open and ambiguous, not least because development policies have to apply to very different contexts and actors, and need to convey both the idea of humanitarianism and that of conditionality at the same time. This also applies to 'participation', which has been a keyword in international development since the late 1980s. In a very general way, participatory development means 'mak[ing] "people" central to development',[6] by involving them in some way in development interventions, listening to their needs and aims, and encouraging them to assume responsibility for and control over 'their' development.

The idea of participation has its roots in political,[7] management,[8] and probably also religious contexts,[9] but it is not new in development language either. The idea of participation can be found in the colonial policies of indirect rule,[10] in all kinds of community deve-

[6] Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, 'The Case for Participation as Tyranny', in eid. (eds.), *Participation*, 1–15, at 5.

[7] John Cohen and Norman Uphoff, 'Participation's Place in Rural Development: Seeking Clarity through Specifity', in Andrea Cornwall (ed.), *The Participation Reader* (London, 2011), 34–56, first published in *World Development*, 8/3 (1989), 213–35.

[8] Harry Taylor, 'Insights into Participation from Critical Management and Labour Process Perspectives', in Cooke and Kothari (eds.), *Participation*, 122–38.

[9] Henkel and Stirrat, 'Participation as a Spiritual Duty'.

[10] Bill Cooke, 'A New Continuity with Colonial Administration: Participation in Development Management', *Third World Quarterly*, 24/1 (2003), 47–61. On colonial development concepts cf. Frederick Cooper, 'Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept', in Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (eds.), *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1997), 64–92.

lopment approaches of the 1960s in Africa and beyond, and in the development landscape of the 1970s, when participation became a concept used by non-governmental development organizations as a central element of alternative, bottom-up development strategies.[11] It was intended as a critique of Western development blueprints and top-down policies focusing on institutional development and on the state as the main actor. As the Western world experienced a 'boom' in emancipatory social movements, emancipatory pedagogy became part of a critical view of development. The idea of 'participation' in the sense of people being actively involved in projects that affect them was closely connected to the ideal of 'empowerment'—that is, the aim of transforming local and global power relations by changing social and economic structures. In the late 1980s, however, international development organizations already presented a more management-oriented discourse on 'participation', emphasizing the importance of involving local actors, their knowledge, skills, and objectives, with a view not only to empowering the powerless but also to making development projects more sustainable and efficient by mobilizing the people concerned and sharing responsibilities and costs with them.[12] It would appear that it was less the political and 'transformative' than the managerial and functional view of participation as a neutral technique, which promises cost-effective and sustainable development, that led to its incorporation into the development establishment by the mid-1990s.[13] Pablo Alejandro Leal argues that the elevation of 'participation' into development discourse happened at the same time as the rise of resistance to the neo-liberal structural adjustment politics of the 1980s and 1990s, and aimed to give these policies a 'human face'. He cites Michel Chossudovsky, who comments on this shift as follows: 'The "official" neoliberal dogma also creates its own "counter-paradigm" embodying a highly moral and ethical discourse.'[14] Thus the notion of participation entered the development mainstream by the end

[11] See Andrea Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation": Models, Meanings and Practices', *Community Development Journal*, 43/3 (2008), 269–83.

[12] Cf. Sarah C. White, 'Depoliticizing Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation', *Development and Practice*, 6/1 (1996), 6–15.

[13] See Cornwall 'Unpacking "Participation"', 271–2; and for typologies of the meaning of 'participation', Cornwall and Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords*, 6–7.

[14] See Pablo Alejandro Leal, 'Participation: The Ascendancy of a Buzzword in the Neo-Liberal Era', in Cornwall (ed.), *The Participation Reader*, 70–81; Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty: The Impacts of IMF and World Bank Reforms* (Mexico City, 2002), 37, cited in Leal, 'Participation', 73.

of the 1980s and, with the adoption of the concept by the World Bank institutions in the 1990s, the ultimate 'participatory turn' took place, making participation the 'new orthodoxy' of the development world.[15]

Today, as Cornwall and Brock state, participation is still a central concept of development discourse, but at the turn of the millennium the language changed from more technical to moralizing. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Millennium Goals, and the narratives of participation, ownership, and empowerment today form part of a mainstreamed 'consensus narrative'.[16] This is a moral narrative that stresses the rightness of the project of development and insight into the importance of shared responsibility, and thus presents 'a normative position as consensus'.[17] In addition to 'participation', this harmonious definition of the development configuration includes the concepts of partnership, dialogue, and accountability.[18] These are indicative of efforts to redefine relations between the actors of the development encounter—be they states, organizations, or individual developers—and the people to be developed. The ideal project of development is now one of close co-operation, friendly dialogue between equal partners, and the finding of a consensus in relation to views and ways that lead to development without disturbing anyone's life in a fundamental way, as it springs from insight into its rightness and necessity.

Advertised in this way, 'participation' should facilitate exchange, give a voice to the actors concerned, and help to avoid the imposition of 'Western' development blueprints all over the world. However, Cornwall and Brock's critical remark on a 'consensus narrative' already highlighted the ambiguity of the idea of 'participation', and indeed it has come under fire in recent years. It soon emerged that participation is on the way to working exactly like any other development approach. It is described in the academic debate

[15] Roderick L. Stirrat, 'The New Orthodoxy and Old Truths: Participation, Empowerment and other Buzzwords', in Sunil Bastian and Nicola Bastian (eds.), *Assessing Participation: A Debate from South Asia* (Delhi, 1996), 67–92; cf. World Bank, *The World Bank Participation Sourcebook* (Washington, 1996).

[16] Cornwall and Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do?', 1054.

[17] Cornwall and Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords*, 3; cf. Leal, 'Participation', 74–5, on the current feel-good rhetoric.

[18] See Eva Spies, *Das Dogma der Partizipation: Interkulturelle Kontakte im Kontext der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit in Niger* (Cologne, 2009); Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Partnership for International Development: Rhetoric or Results?* (Boulder, Colo., 2002).

as a buzzword,[19] tyranny,[20] orthodoxy,[21] dogma,[22] or hegemony in a Gramscian sense.[23] The main objection expressed in these terms is that because of the mainstreaming of participation in international development, every development actor is forced to use this concept without questioning it, as it is now the *sine qua non* of every development intervention and necessary to legitimize it. 'Participation' is idealized, moralized, and universalized, and thus detached from its concrete field of application and its original aim to provide a way of approaching development that is context-sensitive and embraces the needs, skills, and knowledge of the people concerned. By using the term 'dogma of participation' myself, I want to emphasize that the global currency of the participatory development model with its claim to universal validity tends to work today just like any other unquestioned development blueprint, albeit with the specific characteristic that 'participation' is understood as globally applicable (moral) knowledge about development precisely because it pretends to acknowledge the relativity and localism of paths leading to development. This inherent contradiction in the participatory discourse between a universal claim and recognition of the cultural relativity of knowledge influences the attitudes of developers who locate themselves within the frame of reference of participatory development, and whose problems with it will be discussed later.

Some authors see the incorporation of participatory approaches into the dominant development ideology as a strategy for depoliticizing 'participation' in the sense that it is cut off from its radical political roots, having been incorporated only to 'justify, legitimize, and perpetuate current neo-liberal hegemony'.[24] For these critics the rhetoric of participation serves to obfuscate the real power relations of the development world and to whitewash the fact that global structures of power and dependency have not changed to the present day. 'Participation' is seen as a disguise needed to legitimize interventions morally, while its real aim is to reduce costs and shift responsibility. Other critical points made (related to that presented

[19] See Cornwall and Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords* and 'What Do Buzzwords Do?'; Stirrat, 'The New Orthodoxy and Old Truths'; and Leal, 'Participation'.

[20] Cooke and Kothari (eds.), *Participation.*

[21] Stirrat, 'The New Orthodoxy and Old Truths'; Henkel and Stirrat, 'Participation as a Spiritual Duty', 170.

[22] Spies, *Das Dogma der Partizipation.*

[23] Cornwall and Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do?', 1056.

[24] Leal, 'Participation', 76.

above) are that the mainstreaming of 'participation' transforms political problems into technical ones,[25] that 'locals' are romanticized as harmonious communities, power differentials between them tend to be ignored,[26] and that within a single organization or even project, 'participation' can refer to quite different things, depending on the actors' perspectives and interests.[27] As 'participation' is understood as a premiss and a means and an end of development work, its use is arbitrary.

Is 'participation' therefore nothing more than a mere buzzword? Does it empower the powerless or does it obscure power differentials? Is it merely a way of morally legitimizing interventions and an instrument for reducing costs and sharing responsibilities and expenses? Is it strong in theory but weak in practice or vice versa? And is it a means, an end, or both? Different lines of criticism have been followed and it would seem that everything has already been said about participatory development. Nonetheless, in my view it is useful to take a critical look at 'participation' from a different perspective: as an ambiguous way of defining the otherness of the other of the development relation, and as an ethics of understanding.

I agree with David Mosse when he says that ideologies of development act as 'mobilising metaphors'[28]—that is, they are not only about buzzwords. Instead, these ideologies or '[d]evelopment myths work through emotional identification . . .; they build and sustain the feeling of conviction that people need in order to be able to act.'[29] Elsewhere, Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock write: 'The fine-sounding words that are used in development policies do more than provide a sense of direction: they lend the legitimacy that development actors need in order to justify their interventions.'[30] In other words: 'participation' works for the developers as a model of

[25] White, 'Depoliticizing Development'.

[26] Francis Cleaver, 'Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development', in Cooke and Kothari (eds.), *Participation*, 36–55; Henkel and Stirrat, 'Participation as a Spiritual Duty'; Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 'Le "développement participatif": ni solution miracle, ni complot néolibéral', *Afrique contemporaine*, 199/3 (2001), 148–56.

[27] See the typologies in Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation"'; Trevor Parfitt, 'The Ambiguity of Participation: A Qualified Defence of Participatory Development', *Third World Quarterly*, 25/3 (2004), 537–56.

[28] David Mosse, *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice* (London, 2005), 230.

[29] Cornwall and Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do?', 1055.

[30] Cornwall and Brock, *Beyond Buzzwords*, 1 and 2: 'discursive framings are important in shaping development practice'.

and for development work or, to be more precise, the development encounter; this model influences how developers think about their 'other' in the development encounter, their ideals for these encounters, and how they try to shape them. By listening to 'developers in the field', that is, the voices of those who take on the task of implementing the vague and inherently contradictory ideas that constitute the phenomenon we term 'participatory development', I would like to emphasize the importance of taking the emotional involvement of developers seriously and of understanding them as moral beings who are trying to work with not only their technical but also their moral and cultural knowledge, that is, with an ethics of understanding the other of the development encounter.

However, developers try to implement their ambiguous ideas of the development relation in a context that is defined by institutional constraints, contradictory policies, and locals whose interests and moral knowledge may differ and who may tend towards a different ethics.[31] Thus development work is always ambivalent. I will argue, however, that the effort involved in trying to understand the other in a 'participatory mode' increases the developers' risk of encountering dilemmas.

The Paradox of Participation

'An infinitely malleable concept, "participation" can be used to evoke, and to signify, almost anything that involves people.'[32] There is no clear definition of 'participation' in the development world; nevertheless, to this day, the participation of 'those concerned' is the premiss of every kind of development work in the field. The basic idea of participatory development work at local level is to implant in 'those to be developed' a sense of responsibility for and 'ownership' of 'their' development, and to give them an opportunity to take part in the 'development process'. Thus the mode of participation depends on the context, that is, whether they are asked about their needs with the help of a participatory research approach, whether the target group participates in project design and implementation by providing money or manpower, and whether the project is designed to teach locals to organize themselves and to learn what it means to 'participate'. Overall, in practice, 'participation' aims

[31] See Fabian Scholtes, *How Does Moral Knowledge Matter in Development Practice, and How Can it be Researched?*, ZEF Working Papers Series, 40 (Bonn, 2009).

[32] Cornwall, 'Unpacking "Participation"', 269.

to involve locals in the development process and take their ideas, expectations, and cultural values and practices seriously—albeit without the option of questioning the development project, the expertise of developers, or 'participation' itself.

It becomes apparent that 'participation' implies a double standard of evaluation as it combines contradictory evaluations of (cultural) difference. 'Difference' is a premiss of the development encounter and is looked on favourably as a resource for locally adapted development processes. At the same time, however, 'difference' is also considered an obstacle to development and co-operation, and something that must be overcome. Thus on the one hand, the differences between developers and those to be developed are to be accepted and even considered an asset, something to work with in the development process. Yet on the other hand, difference must be minimized through participation to facilitate development. In this sense the perfect development relationship would be one based on dialogue and consensus, common interests, and views, without subordinating the self to the other or the other to the self. In other words, in the encounter between developers and their 'others', a common ground should be created without destroying differences of culture and interest. Thus 'participatory development' implies a contradictory and strongly normative idea of the development relationship in which the boundaries between ideal and actual relations become blurred, and difference is valued only as long as it fits into the approach.

On paper this 'interculturally correct' ideal of the development relationship does not cause any problems. However, those who take on the task of implementing these ideas and who live and act in a field of conflicting demands generated by participatory development face problems as the paradox grows into dilemmas in the course of their daily interactions: irrespective of how a developer decides to act to fulfil one demand of the participatory norm, (s)he will always end up contradicting another. Following contradictory participatory ideals thus necessarily culminates in a quandary, and means being unable to do 'the right thing' in day-to-day intercultural encounters.

Understanding 'the Other' in Niger

I will now explore what exactly it means for development workers to live and act in the frame of reference of participatory development

and its conflicting demands, and to conceptualize relations with those to be developed in accordance with a participatory ethic. To explore this question I refer to the fieldwork I conducted in Zinder (Niger) from December 2000 to February 2002 and during a further two-month period in 2003.[33] Zinder is the second largest town in Niger with about 180,000 inhabitants in 2001. When I was there, the development aid community mainly involved international NGOs with relatively young staff (that is, aged up to their mid-30s). During my research I worked with around thirty European developers from Italy, Britain, Belgium, France, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany. When I refer to these Europeans as 'developers', it should be made clear that the categories of 'developers' and 'those to be developed' are an oversimplification and are not at all clear-cut. However, in the daily interactions I observed during my research and in the interviews I conducted, in the case of the European development aid workers at least, it was always clear that they perceived themselves as 'developers'. And the outside image was usually consistent with this self-perception.[34] Their self-image as developers, however, was highly ambivalent, ranging from the self-confident confirmation of their role as experts one minute, to denial the next. In my view, this was a clear manifestation of the ambiguity of their role as developers working in a participatory mode. The double standard of evaluating the differences of the 'other' results in an ambivalent view of one's own role. It became apparent when, for example, developers in

[33] My ethnographic fieldwork was guided by an understanding of development co-operation that highlights the importance of intercultural face-to-face encounters, and sees development policies, the work of governmental and non-governmental organizations, discourses of development, and local histories of development projects as elements making up the contact zone. The research in Niger was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The research question was how personal intercultural interaction influences local development work and the ideas the actors have about development as well as about each other. Working with around thirty European 'developers' and their local Nigerien contacts (colleagues, friends, partners, employees), I was interested in the images of self and other, the ideals guiding the interactions, and the actual interactions. Interviews, participant observations, and informal conversations made it clear that developers and their local partners referred to different ethics of understanding. They thus had diverging aims and framed the encounters differently: the highly idealized and normative discourse of development co-operation fitted neither with the realities of development bureaucracy nor with Nigerien interests and practices, and thus interactions often led to a dead end.

[34] There are 'Nigerien developers', too, but as a result of the participation hype, large numbers of the Nigeriens on the staff of many organizations were seen as both 'developers' and 'those to be developed': that is, they are working as developers in order to learn the development business from European developers.

Zinder praised the 'strong cultural identity' and even the 'stubborn mentality' of the locals, who were struggling to find their own way and resisting the allurements of globalization and the flood of 'good ideas' as to how they should develop coming from development organizations and their experts, only to state some minutes later that locals would have to change their mentality and some 'culture traits' if they ever wanted to develop.

What follows is an example of a dilemma situation in Zinder which demonstrates what I mean by the contradictory demands of participation in relation to the understanding of the other.

The events occurred towards the end of 2003. A European aid worker had been living in Zinder with his wife and two children for four months. Like most expats, the family employed a local cook and a watchman. The couple did not feel comfortable employing domestics and took great pains to establish friendly relations with them, for example by enquiring after the families of their employees from time to time. In so doing the developer learnt that the youngest child (a baby) of one of his employees had been seriously ill for some time. The employee brought the baby to him and told him that he did not have the money to take the child to the nearby hospital. The developer was very worried about the poor health of the child and immediately decided to give his employee a day off and money for the hospital treatment.

Two days later the developer found out that the employee had not been to the hospital but had spent the money on clothing for his family instead. A Muslim holiday was approaching and, as head of the family, the employee saw this as his duty. Moreover, the developer discovered that the baby had died in the night. He was shocked, confused, and very angry. He pondered over a number of issues in the days that followed. Should he 'understand' the behaviour of the father as a 'cultural mode of action'—that is, ascribe it to cultural values he did not share but had to accept as a stranger in Nigerien society? Or would it be acceptable to consider the behaviour of the employee and father as totally wrong? Was he allowed to object to it because it contradicted his own values, and might he therefore criticize the employee for his behaviour? Another question that bothered him was how he should react next time in a comparable situation. Should he leave the decisions and responsibility to the Zinderois, not question their 'sovereignty' and 'ownership', and value their local knowledge and expertise in questions concerning

local cultural practice—even if he could not accept it? Or should he impose his own values and, for example, teach his employee how to behave and handle his money so that he had enough to take care of his family's health and clothe them? Would this not be patronizing or even neo-colonial? During his entire stay in Zinder the aid worker never found a definite answer to his questions. He decided to reduce contact with his employees to a 'professional level', and to establish rules for when and how he would help out with money—but they did not work.

This brief story points to a problem many developers in Zinder experienced and discussed (during private and professional encounters): while interacting with locals they found themselves involved in situations in which they no longer knew how to act, and felt unable to do 'the right thing'. Many developers experienced intercultural encounters with locals as a dilemma. No matter what they decided and what option they took, they felt that it was wrong. I think one reason for their difficulties lay in their ideal of 'participatory development', which turns out to be not only a contradictory approach to development work, but also an ideal of intercultural understanding and an ambiguous model for coping with 'the other' of the development encounter. According to this paradoxical model, developers should be relativistic, willing to enter into a dialogue, open to accepting the differences between them and their 'partners' as an asset, and willing to learn from them. At the same time developers were meant to be experts, to promote development and participation, to teach people how to participate, and to help them find their way to development. The question that this raises is whether it makes sense to impose self-determination to help others to be themselves.

Double-Bind Situations

Interactions between developers and those to be developed are shaped by many different factors. One of these is how the respective other figures out what form a 'good' relationship takes, and how to cope with the perceived differences of the other. In this context, the European developers referred strongly to an ethics of understanding in the participatory or 'interculturally correct' mode described above, in both private and professional relationships. What appears to be an appropriate way of dealing with locals, however, was not practicable in everyday life in this instance, first because the

developer's ideal is contradictory, and second because their local contact persons appeared to have other ways of dealing with developers. Instead of seeking consensus through dialogue in a manner that recognizes the interests and respects the 'culture' of their interlocutors, 'understanding the other' for the Zinderois was a far more down-to-earth affair: a pragmatic, situational negotiation of interests that refrained from taking 'cultural differences' as a given value. Instead, the locals tended to refer to social differences, accept them as a given, and rank the 'other' within local social hierarchies. Their 'other' in the encounter was not a stranger in cultural terms but a 'social other'. As a result, the relation established between self and other placed social interaction in the foreground rather than cultural difference *per se*. Developers in Zinder were positioned within the local imaginations of social hierarchy and the ideals of giving and taking involved in these. Because they were located as social others—for example, patrons, rich men, the young, or (un)married women—Zinderois seemed to be less interested in understanding the guests' 'culture' and self-conception than in being able to communicate with them and convey their interests. In accordance with their ideals of pluralism, partnership, and participation the developers, on the other hand, tried to 'understand' differences, to show cultural empathy, and, finally, to find consensus—albeit without dissolving differences or changing their own objectives. While interacting with the Zinderois, therefore, the developers tried to act according to their intercultural ethics. They got caught up in the paradoxes inherent in the latter and felt steamrollered by locals who seemingly knew better what they wanted. In contrast, the developers felt torn between their efforts to reconcile differing views and interests and their intention not to let the other person take advantage of them. As a result, some developers fought hard for consensus and many encounters with locals in these situations ended in disputes. In other situations, feelings of despair and sometimes of resignation prevailed among the aid workers. Another way they found of dealing with their dilemma, perhaps the most common, was to retreat. In this case, the developers tried to avoid situations that would lead to a dilemma. They withdrew from contact with locals or reduced it to a minimum.

During their stay in Niger, developers faced similar problems in their private and professional relations: their own ambiguous position towards the other and the differences experienced, and the

line of action followed by their Nigerien contacts, often resulted in the feeling that they did not know how to act. However, the European developers' problems in private encounters were more obvious than those that emerged at the workplace. One reason was that development discourse and professional practices permit the illusion that consensus has already been reached and that different horizons of understanding have already merged into one. While referring to the same concepts and practices in meetings, reports, or evaluations, it is easy to assume that the work of understanding is done and that the development partnership has already been established with the Nigerien colleague.[35] When they spoke about their job with me or other Europeans, however, the developers stated very clearly that this was not, in fact, the case. They experienced the same dilemmas as in private contexts but could not simply withdraw from their jobs or start a dispute to manage their difficulties at the workplace. The following short example of an encounter at the professional interface was reported to me by a young French developer (in his mid-20s), who was deeply disillusioned about development work when I met him.

He told me that he had just realized that a conflict can only be resolved when both sides see that one exists and agree on a common model of conflict resolution, but that these premisses are not always applied in the development world. He worked in the local office of a European aid organization which was headed by a Nigerien director. Like many local bosses, the director acted as patron: he was not really interested in teamwork, shared responsibility, or flat hierarchy. Project procedures were not discussed to find a consensus, and although he listened to his staff, the director made the final decisions. Local members of staff appeared to accept the staging of the director as 'chief' and seemed unimpressed as they went about their work (what they thought about the boss and how they pursued their interests are probably another story). Yet the European developer tried to contribute to the project and to communicate his ideas about project procedure, teamwork, and shared responsibility within a multicultural team. His boss, however, was not interested in these views. The developer did not know how

[35] Richard Rottenburg, *Far-Fetched Facts: A Parable of Development Aid* (Cambridge, 2009), describes this as acting along a 'metacode', in contrast to the different 'cultural codes' the developers use 'backstage'. Mosse, *Cultivating Development*, argues in a similar direction.

to deal with this and struggled with his ambivalent aspirations. He told me that he wanted to accept local ways of seeing things and engage in local ways of 'doing development'. On the other hand, however, he was not ready to give up his ideals about the project and about how development work should be done. He did not want either to be patronized or to patronize. He had come to Niger to contribute to the improvement of the local situation together with locals, and not to take orders with which he disagreed. But what should he do if this was the 'local way of doing development' and he was convinced that it was wrong? Mediation seemed impossible. The French staff member therefore approached the head office in the capital for help and advice; in response, he was told to follow his superior's orders and 'be professional'. The developer felt let down and helpless, disappointed and angry—not only about his Nigerien boss, but even more about his hypocritical superiors in the capital and their talk of professionalism. He had the impression that they considered the standard of participation and partnership was met once locals were part of the development business, and that 'participation' served only as a buzzword and was of no real concern to them. As a result, the developer decided to be less involved in his work and to quit the development business as soon as his contract expired.

I do not wish to propose a general rule here, but the fact remains that many development workers in Niger chose to avoid dilemmas by simply avoiding situations that would lead to them. In both private and professional spheres, many developers decided to withdraw from 'intercultural contacts' with locals as far as possible. The most common coping strategies in the professional sphere were cynicism, inner retreat, and a kind of 'muddling through' approach.

If one reads the literature on 'expats' in development, it becomes clear that withdrawing from contact with locals and especially retreating into their 'own' group are nothing new.[36] However, I would suggest that the reasons for, and conceptualization of, the problem have changed, and with them the feelings and self-evaluations of the developers, since with 'the participatory turn' a moralizing and interculturally correct discourse of co-operation became the

[36] See e.g. Cyril Sofer and Rhona Ross, 'Some Characteristics of an East African European Population', *British Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1951), 315–27; and for a very critical view of expats in East Africa, Paul Theroux, 'Tarzan is an Expatriate', *Transition*, 37/7–1 (1967), 13–19.

new orthodoxy of development. The young developers in Zinder applied high standards of intercultural sensitivity to themselves and others, standards they could not meet. Most of them had high moral standards of 'understanding the other' and of getting along with the Zinderois, but they were not able to practise them in a way that satisfied them and complied with their ethics. Developers have always had to deal with differences and contradictory norms and demands within the world of development. As mentioned above, they move in an arena of ambiguous, sometimes contradictory norms, demands, and objectives as the development business in general, its political and institutional frame, is ambiguous: aid is political without making open politics; it is business without standing by its own interests and the competition of its actors; it is patronizing while claiming to be a selfless activity. However, in my view it is the new moral frame of reference that changes the conceptualization of the problems of co-operation and the experiences and self-evaluations of developers. Today, in the context of participatory approaches and the rhetoric of partnership, development claims to represent a morally and intercultural correct consensus and thus universal norms. This poses a far stronger challenge to the personality and moral integrity of developers themselves. Developers are now part of an official moral discourse of intercultural understanding, partnership, and collective responsibility in a globalized world.[37] If developers experience participation as a model of and for understanding the other of the development encounter, the demands of a participatory ethics challenge not only developers' professional technical or managerial abilities but also their moral knowledge, intercultural sensitivity, and personal competences—that is, their 'personhood'. Thus, having experienced the limits of co-operation and their ethics of understanding, many developers began to question not only the local counterparts and the development business, but also themselves. During my fieldwork in Zinder many were highly dissatisfied and stressed as they felt torn between the contradictory demands and roles they were expected to fulfil in the context of the participatory development approach.[38]

[37] See Cornwall and Brock, 'What Do Buzzwords Do?', 1054–5.

[38] See also Elke Donath, *Zwischen Rahmenbedingungen und Erfahrungen: Experten in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* (Giessen, 2004), on the contradictions inherent in the roles German developers should play and the problems they encounter while trying to fulfil them; and David Mosse, 'Notes on the Ethnography of Expertise and Professionals in

Conclusions

At the outset I cited Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock and their statement to the effect that development concepts work through emotional identification and provide a feeling of conviction that guides developers' actions. In reference to my fieldwork in Niger, I would like to support this statement and emphasize the importance of seeing the development encounter as one of moral beings not only with sometimes different interests and strategies but also with different cultural concepts as to how one should deal with others, and different convictions regarding what is right and wrong. The problems of interaction that the European developers encountered in Niger undoubtedly arose for different reasons, but many of them can be seen as practical problems of understanding the other, while feeling committed to a concept of participation and an ethics that demands contradictory behaviour: developers experienced 'the others' as different and had to find a way of simultaneously appreciating and ignoring their differences; they wanted to be accepted as experts, to achieve their (or their organization's) objectives effectively; and to transfer their knowledge of the right way to 'do development' while avoiding asymmetrical relations. In my view many young developers in Niger tried to act on the contradictory maxims of the dogma of participation, maxims which did not appear to them to be negotiable.

I am by no means calling for the ideals of participation or intercultural understanding to be abandoned. However, a more pragmatic approach to intercultural encounters would perhaps help developers to avoid dilemmas. Processes of understanding are open, never conflict-free, and do not necessarily lead to the elimination of differences and to a consensus. Therefore the guidelines of development work should not be based on conceptions of co-operation that have no provision for controversy. 'Understanding' is a process which is more about transforming, translating, and appropriating meaning than simply transferring it. Thus, in making participation, and along with it intercultural understanding, part of development strategy, it must allow for discussion, controversy, changes, and varying views, and for an 'other' that remains different. Otherwise

International Development', paper presented at 'Ethnografeast III: Ethnography and the Public Sphere', Lisbon, 20–3 June 2007.

it must accept the fact that it is patronizing—at least as long as money, development schemes, and the terms for discussing development options originate exclusively from the Global North. This dominance of 'northern' development concepts stands for another contradiction in which development efforts in sub-Saharan Africa are trapped. Although the relative significance of foreign aid is diminishing, the African 'development world' is still dominated by very general notions and concepts defined by the Global North, and an expanding international development regime. Nevertheless, this is slowly changing, and today African intellectuals and economic experts are beginning to question the dominance and exclusiveness of these development schemes, arguing for country-specific solutions, the diversification of international relations, and hence also for new ways of achieving empowerment and independence from 'global'—that is, still northern—humanitarianism.[39]

[39] See Thomas Bierschenk and Eva Spies, 'Afrika seit 1960: Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven', in eid. (eds.), *50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika: Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven* (Cologne, 2012), 7–51; Carlos Lopes, 'Neue Brüche, alte Wunden: Afrika und die Erneuerung der South Agency', ibid. 539–54; Patrice Nganang, 'Was heißt (schon) Unabhängigkeit? Autobiographie eines Konzeptes', ibid. 555–69.