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Beyond Donor Memory

On Time and Power behind the Curtain of Transnational
Development in Burkina Faso

Melina C. Kalfelis*

'Partnership' is the leading paradigm in development. After the NGO boom, it not only led to significant global power shifts but also changed funding and agenda-setting schemes in nonprofit sectors. Based on multi-sited research in Burkina Faso, Sweden, and Switzerland, this article provides an ethnographic account of NGOisation processes and their effects on development associations in Burkina Faso. Its main goal is to scrutinise the interplays of time, bureaucracy, and power, which leads the article towards three key arguments. By working through the history of the association Biiga Neere, the article shows how partnership policies can rupture the institutional basis of associations by socially restructuring them. Through the newly-introduced concepts of 'donor time' and 'temporal brokerage', an analysis of the temporal struggles at different levels of the collaboration highlights a growing divergence between temporal routines of donors and populations. Finally, the article illustrates how social workers remember donors and how their memories play into their navigation of partner relations, which they perceive as volatile and arbitrary.

Le « partenariat » est le principal paradigme du développement. Après le boom des ONG, il a non seulement entraîné d'importants changements de pouvoir au niveau mondial, mais il a également modifié les schémas de financement et de définition des priorités dans les secteurs à but non lucratif. Basé sur une recherche multi-sites au Burkina Faso, en Suède et en Suisse, cet article fournit un compte-rendu ethnographique des processus d'ONGisation et de leurs effets sur les associations du développement au Burkina Faso. Son objectif principal est de scruter les interactions entre le temps, la bureaucratie et le pouvoir, ce qui conduira l'article vers trois arguments clés. En travaillant sur l'histoire de l'association Biiga Neere, l'article montre comment les politiques de partenariat peuvent rompre la base institutionnelle des associations en les restructurant socialement. Grâce aux concepts nouvellement introduits de « temps des donateurs » et de « *brokerage* temporel », une analyse des luttes temporelles à différents niveaux de la collaboration met en évidence une divergence croissante entre les représentations temporelles des donateurs et des populations. Enfin, l'article montre la façon dont les travailleurs sociaux se souviennent des donateurs et comment leurs souvenirs jouent sur leur navigation avec les partenaires, qu'ils perçoivent comme volatiles et arbitraires.

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Introduction

Almost twenty years ago, the anthropologist James Ferguson (1994) published “The Anti-Politics Machine”, in which he drew attention to the apolitical nature of development. Then as now, the “technocratic illusion” tends to downplay the political life that lies beneath development projects, overruling any kind of “out-of-the-box” thinking (Easterly, 2014). While this illusion has been dissected and criticised by scholars from various disciplines, little seems to change in practice. Perhaps more than ever, bureaucratic principles govern projects and procedures. Experts are still responsible for the planning of programme content, while also adhering to the principle of political non-intervention. Implementation is still limping slowly towards a more historically and culturally aligned position, all the while shaping peoples’ pasts, presents, and futures and their life trajectories, environments, and cultures. Always reflecting critically but leaving little leeway for changing its institutionalised routines, development still leaves behind memories and conclusions, as well as materials, buildings, ideas, and future aspirations. The story of development continues to repeat itself, with minor and major twists at a discursive and practical level, but with little movement when it comes to its control and planning procedures. Paradigms and approaches are shift-shapers – often in reaction to critiques formulated in scholarly debates (Herzfeld, 2001) – while the institution’s overall (re)creation still appears to be far off. Its technocratic logic remains at best incontrovertible, if not, as this article will show, actually becoming more forceful.

In the shadow of paradigmatic changes, the nonprofit sector in particular saw its bureaucratic logic empowered. This trend does not go very far back in history, to a time when civil society developed into a more significant branch of the global development realm. Gaining political momentum from the 1980s on, the multiple forms of civil society (Lewis, 2002) – including (international) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots associations, and other non-profit and charity networks – evolved as political advocates with great potential (Lewis, 2016), as windows into the thoughts and needs of “the poor” (Chambers *et al.*, 2000). These advocates themselves loudly demanded a greater voice and more power, promoting “local knowledge”, “bottom up”, and rural empowerment narratives (Chambers, 1983) and triggering significant political and structural shifts. Soon thereafter, multilateral programmes mushroomed globally, blending “governmental” and “private”, and “nongovernmental”, “local”, and “global” stakeholders (Axelby and Crewe, 2013). Mid-range international NGOs in particular saw a significant rise in their budgets, and gained attention and visibility worldwide. At the same time, a more consequent incorporation of the ‘nonstate’ branch also had advantages for the development apparatus as a whole, enhancing the legitimacy of an aid industry whose history had until then been narrated as a (hi)story of failure.

This process of “transnationalisation” was formalised in 2005 by the Paris Declaration, followed by the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) and the Busan Declaration (2011). Development actors worldwide witnessed a historic turning point, with new buzzwords like “ownership” and “partnership” emerging on the horizon. Partnership has forged a career for itself as one of the most powerful and enduring euphemisms in contemporary

international cooperation, not only discursively transforming development countries into eye-level partners, but also stressing civil society organisations as the new solution to a more situated approach to development. In response, development slowly but steadily broadened its spectrum and changed its logics of cooperation by including not only NGOs but also organisations and voluntary associations at the grassroots level more systematically (Lewis and Schuller, 2017). In particular, the social work sector in the Global South noticed this “boom” (Alvarez, 1999). Its expertise and support were increasingly in demand, while its areas of responsibility expanded. In practice, however, this process, which anthropologists have labelled “NGOization” (Hilhorst, 2003), was less inclined to align with on-site work ethics and principles, but rather championed “the project form” (Sampson, 2017: 15) and its time- and content-related principles (Davidov and Nelson, 2016).

Based on multi-sited ethnographic research with social workers and NGO employees in Burkina Faso, Sweden, and Switzerland (2009-2017), this article provides an ethnographic account of NGOization in a partnership between the “Biiga Neere” (BN) grassroots association¹ and the “Youth Vision” (YV) international NGO. After a few methodological and theoretical remarks in the next section, it takes an in-depth look behind the curtain of the BN-YV partnership. By working through the history of BN, which ran a school for orphans before becoming an implementation partner for YV’s child sponsorship programme, the third section explains how partnership policies rupture and endanger the institutional basis of grassroots associations by bureaucratically inflating and socially restructuring them. The fourth section discusses global power shifts in development and introduces the concept of ‘donor time’, whose logics and instruments of time are prioritising the *what* less than the *when* in the development realm. This causes temporal struggles at different levels of NGO partnerships, many of them in the everyday lives of BN social workers. They have to mediate between ‘donor time’ and people’s priorities and routines for coping with marginalisation and hardship, which marks temporal brokerage as a new form of intermediation. At the same time, partnership policies also have harmful effects on social workers’ own struggles for a livelihood, which shapes the enunciated memories of donors as well as the stances social workers adopt towards them. Against this background, the last section analyses NGO partnerships through the eyes of the BN social workers, who remember and navigate partnerships as a deeply unstable and volatile endeavour that can neither be trusted nor relied on.

Navigating and Theorising Spaces of Transnational Partnership

This paper is based on eleven months of multi-sited ethnographic research in Burkina Faso between 2009 and 2017. I began my study working as a volunteer at “Biiga Neere” (BN) in Zorgho, the provincial capital of Ganzourgou Province, which gave me the opportunity to follow it through the course of different partnerships (the main part of my research focused on five development associations in Zorgho). In addition, I carried out open-ended

¹ In order to protect the organisations, their names are fictitious. In the language of Mooré, the most widespread language in Burkina Faso, *biiga* means “child” and *neere* means “beautiful”.

interviews and participant observations at their donors' NGO headquarters in Sweden and Switzerland for several weeks. Only YV declined my request for research at its head office. Instead, I was able to conduct an expert interview on Skype and two open-ended interviews with YV employees in the country office in Ouagadougou, and to attend several meetings between BN and YV. Accessing and navigating NGO offices and meetings, especially along the whole cooperation chain (Latour, 2005), posed significant ethical and practical challenges because of tight schedules, a fear of criticism, and power imbalances both within the partnership and between me and my interlocutors (Ouma, 2012). In Burkina Faso, being a white European, which has its own colonial implications (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019), conducting research in a field dominated by white experts required regular clarification and explanations in order to balance out differing expectations, some of which were financial. I was as transparent as I could be about my role and goals, which was important in order to establish a degree of trust and mutual interest (Beech *et al.*, 2009), especially with the social workers. However, in rural communities, which I only visited sporadically, some assumptions about my role were difficult to dispel.

I situated myself within the discourse of the critical anthropology of development, which means that I moved away from dealing with the successes or failures of NGO projects and relied on phenomenological and poststructuralist approaches (Giddens, 1976). My interest therefore centred around the everyday 'lifeworlds' (Jackson, 2012) of social workers, as well as the historical and global entanglements of development practices and procedures, which permeated – and were being permeated by – everyday life (Kalfelis and Knodel, 2021a). This shed light on the simultaneity of the micro- and macro-processes that produce, shape, and conserve the layers, fragments, and (neo)colonial histories of development (Büschel and Speich, 2009; Escobar, 1995, 2004). I investigated these macro- and micro-processes in the donors' and associations' offices through ethnographic methods and, drawing on Bourdieu's approach (1986), the collection of twenty-two biographical narratives of social workers in Burkina Faso. This allowed me to understand development *through* their memory (Lavabre, 2007), which was deeply embedded in the shared social space (Ricoeur, [2000] 2009), and became a compass for navigating the social sector. Especially when the social workers evoked how they remembered donors, they were not only reviving but also empowering their memories to shape situated logics of dealing with them. In this sense, their memories of donors were also about "coming to terms with the past in a present that is [...] troubled by it" (Argenti and Schramm, 2009: 17).

Ultimately, the biographical narratives combined with observations from the field also offered an insight into the state of hardship and chronic instability from which some people in Burkina Faso enter the social sector in search of a perspective for the future, including social work, and try to derive *something* out of it for themselves, like money, education, or new opportunities (Knodel, 2021). Some authors have asserted that this attitude towards employment is the antithesis of the nonprofit sector's charitable ideal (Neubert, 1997; Lewandowski, 2007); however, not only does this perspective ignore the colonial history of civil society in Africa (Ekeh, 1994; Osaghae, 2006), but it also lacks a critical engagement with the colonial legacy of discourse on voluntarism and "self-help" (Büschel, 2014) as well as the contemporary exploitative labour architecture of development (Rossi, 2017). My

research reveals massive double moral standards when it comes to work ethics, conditions, and values in NGO partnerships along the North-South divide (Kalfelis, 2020). Some of the most obvious signs of inequality in labour relations are the large salary gaps and legally questionable working conditions and contracts on the African side of the partnership, as well as an unusually reckless, often time-related, way of exerting pressure.

A Brief History of NGOization: “Biiga Neere” in Burkina Faso

Civil society and union associations have a vibrant history in Burkina Faso (Engels, 2013). Some were very much inspired by the former socialist president Thomas Sankara, who ruled the country between 1983 and 1987 and was famous for his popular mobilisation of peasant initiatives (Schmitz, 1987). Today, a huge section of the grassroots associations that are shaping the country’s political landscape is active in development (Sissao, 2021), the “Biiga Neere” (BN) association among them. Its founder, a trained bilingual teacher in his fifties who works in the *éducation non formelle* sector of the *Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale et de l’Alphabétisation*, had the idea of building a school that provided orphaned, abandoned, and marginalised children with a primary education. The curriculum covered reading and writing in Mooré and French, basic mathematics, geography, and history. When I first arrived in Zorgho in 2009, the BN school building and courtyard were also a social space for the children where they would spend their free time and find support in case of an emergency like illness.

Over the years, the school’s running costs, the salaries of five teachers, and the children’s lunches were supported financially by several small- and medium-sized European NGOs. In hindsight, it appears that at the time, some donors were more eager to fund structures and projects that had been invented and built by associations in Burkina Faso, perhaps because unconditional ‘core contributions’ – which I will return to later – were more common then. The last funding for the school came from a Dutch NGO, which terminated its partnership in 2012 after five years. With no new donors on the horizon, payments for the BN teachers’ salaries dried up, posing the very significant challenge of self-financing. When I returned in 2013, the five teachers had been teaching without a salary for several months, which is why four of them had already left or were in the process of leaving.

All the while, BN was in transition after the founder successfully applied for a vacant partner position with the “Youth Vision” (YV) international NGO. Based in Canada, YV has worked in Burkina Faso since 1987, and is involved in different sectors such as health, water, education, and sustainability. All its activities are related to a sponsorship programme for children, which mainly consists of various forms of correspondence between children and sponsor parents, and the exchange of small gifts, photos, and information. Because it was focused on its own agenda, YV therefore declined to provide any support to rescue the BN school. In an open-ended interview, YV’s programme coordinator explained that “YV does not spend money on its partners’ projects” (28/01/2013, Ouagadougou), adding that partners were expected to carry the costs for their projects autonomously in order to avoid relations of dependence. Instead, BN was supposed to become the “eyes and ears” of the donor (Kalfelis and Wagner, 2019), and was funded to manage and implement YV’s

sponsorship programme, while its already fragile core activities remained neglected. As a consequence, BN, which was administratively overwhelmed by the new partnership, ultimately lost track of its original agenda, which is why the school had to shut down completely in mid-2013. This story is fairly typical of the ones to be found behind the office doors of grassroots associations in Burkina Faso.

Two project managers and one executive manager were employed for the sponsorship programme. They had been working at the school for orphans for years and belonged to a first generation of BN social workers. As early as my period of research in 2013, however, the YV country office in Ouagadougou had reported dissatisfaction with the team. In the same interview (28/01/2013), the YV programme coordinator revealed that its head office was dissatisfied with the two project managers' operational abilities, mainly in relation to administrative tasks. Her first criticism was that the sponsored children's letters were not in the required form or submitted punctually to the country office in Ouagadougou, where an elaborate process of content review, translation, and visual evaluation had been set up. The second was that the two project managers did not comply with the fixed working hours, which were from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. The YV was unwilling to put up with this attitude to work and assumed that they were incapable of performing their tasks, and so it terminated their contracts without notice.

In retrospect, the dismissal of the two BN project managers turned out to be a key moment in the NGOization of BN. When I returned to Zorgho in 2015, the transformation of the association was complete: the classrooms in the school for orphans had been changed into working offices and a new BN team with twelve university graduates was in place. This second generation of social workers had been recruited from the capital, and like many other recent graduates in law and economics, they were pursuing serious career goals in the development sector (Sundberg, 2021). Furthermore, with more than 1,300 children registered, the sponsorship programme had expanded massively. For an organisation that used to run a school with no more than 80 children, the workload was immense, and the new BN employees were heavily occupied with schedules and accountability procedures. What challenged them the most were the strict deadlines that had been laid down to produce, control, and translate the correspondence between the children and the sponsor parents. They were the most carefully timed, but also the most disturbed processes in the partnership, mainly due to the multiple rhythms and representations of the resulting time frames (see below).

By the end of 2017, YV had terminated the partnership, and even though YV was not the first donor the association had lost, BN dissolved too. This shutdown, I argue, was fostered by donor policies that hollowed out the internal structure of BN in two stages. As a first step, YV had pushed the first generation of social workers out, thereby depriving the partner of its social basis. This first generation may have lacked the education and training to fulfil administrative tasks, but their support for their association beyond its budgetary horizon was crucial, and it does not matter if this was because of subsidiary obligations or simply a lack of alternatives (Kalfelis, 2015). At the second stage, a professionally skilled second generation was employed that successfully satisfied YV's expectations. Very reasonably,

however, this generation was striving to move upwards in their careers, and thus had little sense of an obligation towards BN. An emphasis of this structural shift from the first to the second generation of social workers is intended neither to romanticise nor to essentialise, but merely to illustrate what types of NGOization processes will create harmful consequences for the already fragile institutional basis of grassroots associations in the Global South. The politics of partnership creates its own histories, and like failed projects, remains prone to unintended consequences. Another example of these consequences is the growing expansion of bureaucratic principles and work ethics instead of an active integration of situated manners to structure work, time, and planning in development. This creeping expansion process is fragmented, difficult to grasp, and hard to trace, especially at a global policy-making level. However, future researchers can be sure that the ruins of partnerships are still traceable worldwide (Schler and Gez, 2018), as are the memories of donors and their policies of collaboration.

Donor Time, Temporal Brokerage, and Everyday Struggles

Time is an instrument of power in NGO partnerships. Clocks give projects, monitoring, and evaluations a clear rhythm, one that cannot easily be challenged. They provide a marker to hold on to, and feed into the fragile illusion that it is possible to exercise real control over places far away from head offices. This illusion has a very trivial explanation: clock time, or “natural time” as the historian Reinhart Koselleck (2000: 10) has labelled it, demarcates the only frame of reference that has claims to be universal. Natural time and date are among the few globally congruent control points that a head office can assume to be equally valid both here and there, at project sites as well as in the organisation’s offices. Natural time lies at the heart of ‘donor time’. It is the physical unit every social worker worldwide works through: 9 September 2016 at 9 a.m. in Zurich is also 9 September 2016 at 9 a.m. in Ouagadougou (-1), New Delhi (+4), and Managua (-7). It structures all places, projects, practices, and offices, no matter how close or far away they may be. Veronica Davidov refers to this type of time as “self-evident, bureaucratic, fixed, rational, noncontingent” (2016: 4), serving the evaluation of projects’ successes and failures (*ibid.*: 39). It substantiates donors’ imaginations that they are in control of the most remote corners of the world, that foreign places are manageable. Development projects may have vague outcomes, but what donors can rely on is clocks, calendars, and irrefutable schedules. They may be plagued by how projects operate on site or whether budgets are spent as intended, but what they can trust is that the entire chain of command is managed by clocks, and that clocks are powerful enough to bypass other representations, rhythms, and practices of time.

Donor Time

The growing dominance of time planning in NGO work goes back to global policies that tend to remain hidden in anthropological studies on development. Often focused on the receiving side of aid, backstage processes that reshape the working conditions of so-called partners in Africa require more ethnographic approximations in the donors’ offices. My interviews in Switzerland (Zürich, 27/09/2016) revealed how new aid policies (Stokke, 2019)

and distribution keys bring in more money for NGOs, but also change the rules of the game. At a more concrete level, the so-called 'primary donors' on which NGOs have always depended financially to different degrees (such as the EU, state ministries, and foundations) (Dia *et al.*, 2011: 77-81) are being given more and more decision-making power, and as a *quid pro quo*, NGOs are noting a growing loss of autonomy. This loss is mirrored in statistics from the Development Cooperation Report (2017) that point to changed flows of development capital. The so-called Official Development Assistance (ODA), the budget distributed by 'primary donors', is increasingly flowing *through* NGOs (via 'conditional mandates') instead of being provided *to* NGOs (unconditional 'core contributions'). While the latter situation leaves a chunk of the budget at the NGO's disposal, mandates grant the donors of donors, who have also been labelled the "men behind the curtain" (Schuller, 2017: 23), much more power over planning, implementation, and accountability requirements before programmes are even launched. This process, which I have highlighted elsewhere as a concealed dimension of the often-contested "shrinking spaces of civil society" (Kalfelis, 2020: 277-281), shifts the logics of funding, agenda-setting, and North-South cooperation. It is also closely related to the transnationalisation of development I outlined in the introduction, and involves social sectors and nonprofit branches across the globe.

Changing capital flows demarcate one of the many causes of NGOization in Africa and beyond. They not only diminish the leeway accorded to NGOs to set up and adapt working conditions and project rhythms for partner organisations in the Global South, but also nourish processes of neoliberalisation and bureaucratisation by privileging structures that adopt the project's logic and adhere to aid effectiveness principles. These principles lead to a realm of time representation that I label 'donor time'. This concept describes not only the structural conditions of time in NGO partnerships such as short-term work contracts and limited project cycles, but also the daily practices of meticulous planning, all of which are becoming increasingly dominant and demanding in the social work sector in Burkina Faso. Its representations and techniques resonate with Laura Bear's (2015: 6) "modern time", which "is characterised by unprecedented doubt about, and conflict in, representations of time", evoking an array of technical and ethical problems in "global workplaces" (*ibid.*: 22). However, these workplaces go back to various histories that result in particular degrees and patterns of inequality and power. They not only bring distinct techniques for handling time or specific rhythms and rules in capital flows to the fore, but also rely on different instruments of time, which have distinct objectives. As such, 'donor time' as a sub-form of modern time draws our attention to tools for surveillance and control in an industry that has emerged from colonial schemes (Bernal, 1997) and Christian values (Bornstein, 2001). As the next section will show, efforts to discipline people with these tools are incomparably practical, and are enforced through explicit threats and damage mechanisms. They attempt to impose temporal rhythms throughout *distant* and *proximate* scales of interaction between partners who are not at eye level (Kalfelis and Knodel, 2021b: 34-40), thereby giving rise to temporal struggles at different levels of the cooperation, as well as new forms of mediation in West Africa.

On Correspondence and Control

The BN-YV partnership's attachment to natural time was nowhere as evident as it was in the management of the correspondence between sponsor parents and sponsored children. This was of different types, and included "First Letters" – the initial correspondence between sponsor parents and a child – and the "Annual Letter". In addition, sponsor parents received an annual "Child Progress Report", in which they learned about the child's living conditions and followed their physical details – a questionable form of accountability that deserves a specific reflection, albeit one that is outside the scope of this article. Another format was the "Child Designated Gift", through which the sponsor parents could make a financial gift to the child, to which he or she had to respond with a "Thank You Note", ideally with a picture of the object the money was provided for. Apart from these obligatory formats, sponsor parents could also write open letters at any given time to obtain information about the child. This required the children to write a "Letter of Response" within a clearly specified period. Such open letters were not allowed the other way around.

In terms of practices, managing the correspondence first meant collecting information, photos, and letters directly from the sponsored children. The letters then went through an initial quality check on their content and aesthetics at BN before they were forwarded to YV's country office. If the letters met the required quality standards, the country office in Ouagadougou translated them from French into English, verified their quality again, and sent them to YV's headquarters in Canada. From there, employees checked the quality of the letters a third time and sent them to the sponsors, who lived all over the world. The highest priority in this process was to comply with the sensitive temporal rhythm of accountability. Any delay at any of the control points had a butterfly effect, creating noticeable time breaches and struggles at all the other levels, throwing the whole chain of correspondence into disarray, and risking a delay in providing the sponsors with the letters in due time. These "audit cultures" (Strathern, 2000) therefore depended heavily on the paces and rhythms outside BN's offices, and temporal routines in the streets and courtyards of the people who were receiving aid. If a sponsored girl did not show up for her photo appointment, a final evaluation report would be delayed. If a sponsored boy was absent because he had had to move in with relatives (although YV did not allow sponsored children to leave their communities), the letter would not be in the sponsor parents' hands at the right time. If a child did not keep his or her promise to use the school break to pass by the dusty BN desk set up in the sponsored community, squeezed into a storage room with no windows, the "Letter of Response" would remain unfinished. These are just small examples of the minor events that have a conflictual effect at several levels of the donor's temporal regime.

The second generation of BN workers quickly became aware of the temporal sensitivities that shaped the correspondence procedures. They saw a high correlation between adhering to schedules and being valued as competent and trusted partners. But this was not the only incentive for struggling for punctuality: every delay triggered vicious circles of time. With each missed deadline, a so-called "catch-up plan" had to be drafted that defined new deadlines and made the workload for the following week even heavier and less feasible. Every time I passed by the office after a "catch-up plan" had been put in place, the climate in the

office was particularly tense. I then kept my greetings short, offered my help, or just sat in silence. After I had joined some monitoring meetings between BN and YV, I was aware how uncomfortable the YV employees became when a time lag was looming or already present in Zorgho.

Nevertheless, at times I was astonished how much the BN workers cared about meeting the letter deadlines and quality requirements, spending whole weekends of unpaid overtime hours to carry out their task punctually. It was only in 2017, at a very late stage of my research, that I learned the reason for the tireless harassment I had observed over the years. YV had a monthly grading system the donor used to assess the work performance of its African counterparts. The so-called Key Performance Indicators (KPI) graded partner associations in Burkina Faso individually according to five key indicators, with several sub-indicators, which formed an overall grade on a scale from 0% to 100%. With a grade below 90%, the partner already had to provide reasons to the YV country office in Ouagadougou. If the overall grade fell below 80%, YV threatened to terminate the partnership. For instance, when the two project managers in the former BN team were dismissed by YV in 2013 (see above), BN's rating was 50%. Most of the indicators were aimed at evaluating adherence to schedules and the quality of letters and reports. In fact, time-related indicators comprised at least 70% of the document, which stated: "annual letters [...] are submitted to the Country Office 45 days before the due date" or "requests are fully processed within a maximum of one month". Even more disturbing was YV's custom of sending the monthly KPI grading around in a mailing list that included all five partners in different regions of Burkina Faso. In this way, each organisation was able to view the performance of the other associations, creating a bizarre climate of competition and loss of face (Goffman, 1959).

Temporal Brokerage

The KPI leaves little doubt as to how much pressure YV exerted over the BN workers to mediate between the temporal logics of the sponsorship programme and people's social routines of time. The BN workers' struggle closely reflects the literature on brokerage (for an overview, see Bräuchler *et al.*, 2021), which has, among other things, shed light on how intermediaries channel resources between the development industry, NGOs, and communities in Africa (Bierschenk *et al.*, 2002) and contribute to processes of governance (Hönke and Müller, 2018). Their mediation function, however, was heavily focused on bridging divergences between 'donor time' and social routines for making it through the day. If one turns this perspective around, one might also say that YV depended heavily on the social workers' ability to make schedules and deadlines as binding as possible on all the actors involved when it came to the implementation and settlement of the programme.

The more successful the social workers were at brokering different representations and functions of time, the more satisfied YV was. In Kanré, a community with 700 sponsored children located far from state infrastructures, temporal brokerage represented quite a challenge for the social workers. They struggled to constrain and have some level of control over when people worked and moved around. If they needed a photo at short notice

because the sponsor had asked for one, they would drive for more than an hour to Kanré, hoping that the sponsored child would be punctual (and wear clean clothes, which was also required by YV). There were countless examples of social workers working hard to ensure people's availability in a certain place at a certain time. Meanwhile, although many sponsored children and parents were undoubtedly committed to the programme, they were often hours late, or failed to show up at all. This non-compliance also created a high level of frustration and inner conflict for the social workers. I saw them being torn between horrifying stories about untraceable sponsored children in unstable homes and the powerful silence of the correspondence schedule in their hands. At other moments, some spent days trying to reach people on their mobile phones, while others, visibly annoyed, returned from a field trip with only half the planned letters having been prepared. Many tasks were simply not feasible, which is why they repeatedly had to bridge time gaps, work overtime hours, appropriate plans, cheat, and negotiate with project recipients or the country office in Ouagadougou. Sometimes, they argued with YV employees and fought for more recognition for their efforts, or otherwise they gave in, broke or enforced the rules, resisted requirements, or simply reacted with silence.

Temporal brokerage represents a new category of mediation guided by neoliberal principles in transnational development cooperation. It shows the need for more in-depth ethnographic studies on the conflicts and struggles unfolding through processes of NGOization. If we look at partnerships integrated into programmes with mandatory agreements (see above) in particular, in which content, rhythms, and procedures are already prescribed, donor practices truly reveal how domination behind "historical and contemporary transnational, and indeed global pyramidal, power structure[s]" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022: 92) actually *works*, and how its regulating tools create shared and distinct struggles in the transnational space. Many of these struggles – and certainly the temporal ones – do not take place in the Global South alone: they unfold in the buildings and offices of development organisations worldwide. Employees in offices in Sweden, Switzerland, and Burkina Faso complained about increasing administrative burdens that reduced their time for doing content-related work to a minimum. Everywhere I looked in this research, 'donor time' consumed the space to reflect *why* people neglect their supposed responsibilities or what experiences make people set priorities in a particular way. It simply diminished the margins for caring about *what* people do by placing the focus on *when* they do it.

Shared Memories of Partnership in Social Work

No matter how strongly 'donor time' was developed to overcome the social representations and rhythms of time in Burkina Faso, its requirements shattered into pieces in the face of people's persistent routines and irrefutable priorities. This is when the temporal struggles at a donor level became most palpable. Its neat and clean planning encountered problems with the fact that recipients and sponsored children decided how far their commitment for development programmes would go on a daily basis. One day, they appeared punctually and carried out the time-consuming obligations imposed by the programme, while on another they simply had more important things to do. People confronted with instability and

hardship, which aid recipients tend to be, remain flexible when it comes to responding to short-term opportunities and obligations in economic and social terms. This flexibility is almost diametrically opposed to donors' increasingly stringent, strict, and detailed planning. The more draconian 'donor time' becomes, in other words, the more it creates conflict and contradiction in the places of intervention.

The temporal routines cultivated under such chronic forms of hardship and crises merit a separate analysis of their own (Vigh, 2008; Kalfelis, 2020). For the sake of the argument I present in this section, I will simply underline the fact that apart from the aid recipients, some BN social workers, especially those from the first generation, also worried constantly about their livelihoods. To return to the two project managers who were quickly dismissed by YV (see above), these worries were crucial for understanding their irregular presence at the office. One of them, for instance, did not want to rely solely on the social sector, as funding cycles proved to be short and partnerships were clearly unstable, which is why he used part of his YV salary to pay for driving lessons so that he could later become a truck driver, which is considered to be a more stable area of work, and is one he has in fact been working in since 2019. Interestingly, he also had the full support of the BN executive manager, who neither questioned his integrity nor criticised him, and even endorsed his strategy. Based on his own experiences with donors and the lack of transparency of their leadership, he was convinced of how important it was to maintain economic side lines.

The practices YV interpreted as a sign of unreliability and lack of ability were therefore also an elaborate response to the ephemeral nature of NGO partnerships. NGO programmes and project cycles might be designed to forget the past (Lewis, 2016), but they cannot erase the traces in peoples' memory (Büschel, 2021). Donor memories are evocative, and affect people's stance towards them. They emerge from and inform (Ricoeur, [2000] 2009) the lived social spaces in which development is entangled, and where it shapes shared memories hiding behind designations like "development actor" and "social worker". Especially for the first generation of social workers, donor memories were explicitly evoked and retold as a way of questioning the usefulness of a draconian commitment to donors' plans and schedules. This does not mean that they were not also keen to satisfy the programme's requirements, but like aid recipients, their eagerness had its limits in their own struggle for a secure future.

This case shows the extent to which perceived unreliability and distrust within NGO partnerships can be mutual. Donors frame their partners in Africa as unreliable, without realising that it might be their own policies that create an imponderable global workspace. In the offices of the African counterpart, there was little that seemed to be as elusive as the cooperation itself. The lack of transparency was particularly remarkable. Why YV requested a certain document or why a decision had been taken was rarely explained to the social workers in Zorgho, who were often only able to infer why a project was funded for a certain period of time, why their contracts were terminated, or why the donor needed a particular picture. Often, even the reasons for not renewing a contract or ending a project remained hidden or were delivered in a muddled way (Lauterbach, 2021). It is against this background that practitioners demand more consequent "feedback loops" and mechanisms of

“downward accountability” (Roche, 2015: 86), especially with regard to communities of information, where similar information policies prevailed. Its members rarely had insights into the nature of projects, goals, and ideas connected to them. Even if donors carried out surveys and questionnaires before launching a programme, they rarely informed communities of the outcome of these questionnaires or the decision-making that followed it. YV, for instance, had subsidies to carry out a larger project for the community of Kanré. Despite the fact that a survey revealed that the majority of inhabitants wanted a health centre to be built, YV built two new classrooms for the school. The reasons behind this decision remained concealed from the community, the BN workers, and me. We could often only hypothesise about the inscrutable ways of YV.

Conclusion

An ethnographic look behind processes of NGOization against the background of the partnership paradigm reveals a profound misalignment: the global integration of civil society has not brought people’s views, interests, or needs closer to the experts: rather, expertise and planning are digging deeper into peoples’ lifeworlds. In contrast to the original idea of integrating civil society as advocates of local populations, many grassroots associations have become engaged in temporal brokerage, mediating between peoples’ struggles for a livelihood and the representations and instruments of ‘donor time’. However, how donors treat their partners in Africa and how their power plays out behind the curtain of transnational cooperation might be forgotten in the hallways of certain development institutions, but that is not the case everywhere. Over the past decades, people in Zorgho have been first-hand witnesses to the evolution and dissolution of NGO partnerships without regard being paid to the manifold examples of damage they leave behind them. These things never go by unnoticed. They cultivate insecurity, arbitrariness, and unreliability in already unstable and bumpy political environments, deepening social memories that nurture a general suspicion towards them. Many social workers actively draw on these memories so that they will remain conscious of the fact that the future of their jobs and the durability of a project relies on norms, procedures, and decision-making processes that are outside their sphere of influence. I have even seen these memories drown some people’s dedication to the social sector, whether they belonged to the first or second generation. Quite a few I know of have left the field for good, while others have consciously decided against collaborating with international donors (Ouédraogo, 2021). Some of the workers I met during my research are now ashamed of the way they had to engage with sponsored children, while others have lost face because of the false promises they have made in the name of donors (Kalfelis and Knodel, 2021b: 38-39). These latter memories and (hi)stories in particular clearly show that even though NGOization concerns the whole nonprofit sector, not all social settings are equally exposed to them.

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